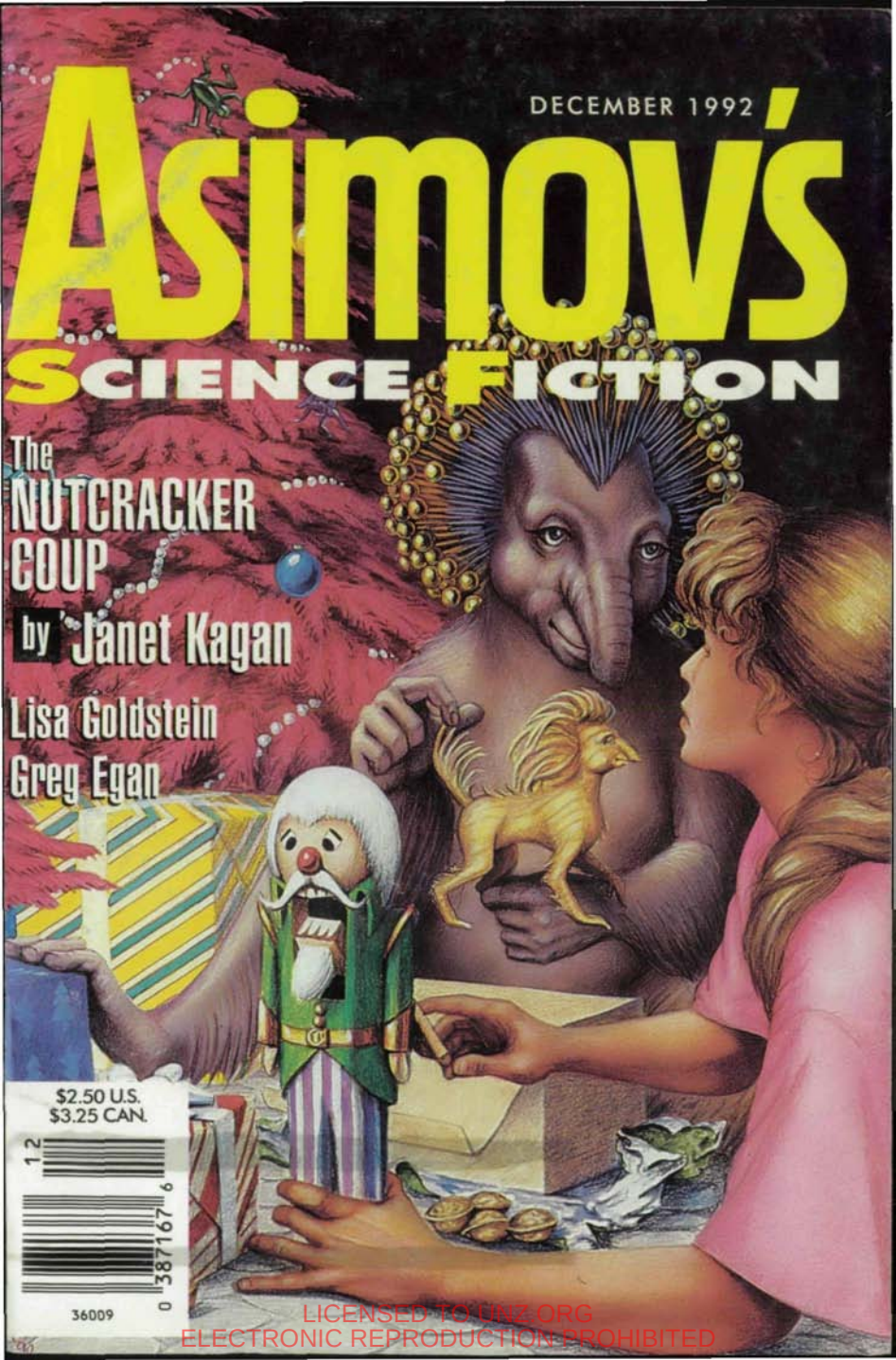


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

7872 $20.00/**$10.98**

8425 $21.95/**$8.98**

8466* $27.95/**$14.98**

Choose any 5 for $1 with membership

4796 $24.95/**$12.98**

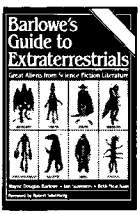
6759 $21.95/**$11.98**

8433 $22.00/**$10.98**

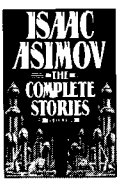
8755 **$9.98x**

8763++ $18.50/**$7.98**

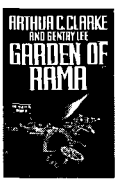
7963 $22.95/**$12.98**



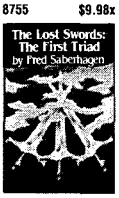
6916 **$12.98x**



7989 **$10.98x**



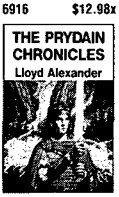
7666 $20.00/**$10.98**



7260 *Woundhealer's Story, Sightblinder's Story, Stonecutter's Story*
$45.85#/$12.98

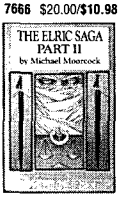
5017 *Farslayer's Story, Coinspinner's Story, Mindsword's Story*
$50.85#/$13.98

4747 *So You Want to Be a Wizard, Deep Wizardry, High Wizardry*
$45.85#/$12.98



5595 All 5 novels plus *The Foundling & Other Stories*
$83.70#/$14.98

0752 *Elric of Melniboné, The Sailor on the Seas of Fate, The Weird of the White Wolf*
$9.98x



1172 *The Vanishing Tower, The Bane of the Black Sword, Stormbringer*
$10.98x

HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN...

A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION. Once your membership's accepted, we'll send the 5 BOOKS you've chosen. If you're not 100% satisfied with them, return the books within 10 days *at our expense.* Membership will be canceled and you'll owe nothing.

HUGE DISCOUNTS ON HARDCOVER BOOKS. Save as much as 65% off publishers' hardcover edition prices. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE. You'll receive up to 16 issues a year. Each issue reviews the Featured Book Selection(s) plus a wide variety of alternate books from the Club's extensive library.

SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE. To get the Featured Book Selection(s), *do nothing*—it will be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—simply return your Member Reply Form by the specified date. A shipping and handling charge is added to each order.

AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION. *Take up to 2 years to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices.* Afterwards, you may resign membership anytime.

RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES. If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine was delayed and you had less than 10 days to respond, simply return the book *at our expense.*

Prices in fine print are publishers' hardcover editions.

Prices in bold print are Club hardcover editions.

* Explicit scenes and/or language

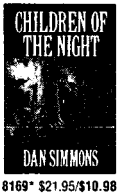
x Hardcover edition exclusively for Club members

\# Combined publishers' editions

+ Copyright © 1991 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.
STAR TREK and Related Marks are Trademarks of Paramount Pictures.
++™ and © 1991 Lucasfilm Ltd. All Rights Reserved.
Used Under Authorization.
Copyright © 1992 by DC Comics, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Published by arrangement with Warner Books, Inc./New York.
Cover photo courtesy of Warner Bros.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Let me go, Shorty. You'll find better tales in the books below."



8169* $21.95/$10.98

8177* $19.95/$10.98

6924+ $18.95/$9.98

4994 $7.98x

5918* $22.95/$10.98

8565 $21.95/$10.98

7609* *The Book of the Damned, The Book of the Beast*
$39.90#/$10.98

8417 *The Rainbow Abyss, The Magicians of Night*
$10.98x

8599 *Summertide, Divergence, Transcendence*
$51.90#/$14.98

8573 $7.98x

8458Δ $7.98x

8193 $6.98x

THE Science Fiction BOOK CLUB®

MAIL TO: *The Science Fiction Book Club*
6550 East 30th Street, P.O. Box 6367
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6367

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *The Science Fiction Book Club* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 5 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just $1, plus shipping and handling.

SAVE MORE—BUY YOUR FIRST BOOK NOW FOR $2.98
☐ Send me the book I've indicated and reduce my commitment to only 3 more books. Bill me an additional $2.98, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

37604 33

Mr./Mrs.
Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

37605 31

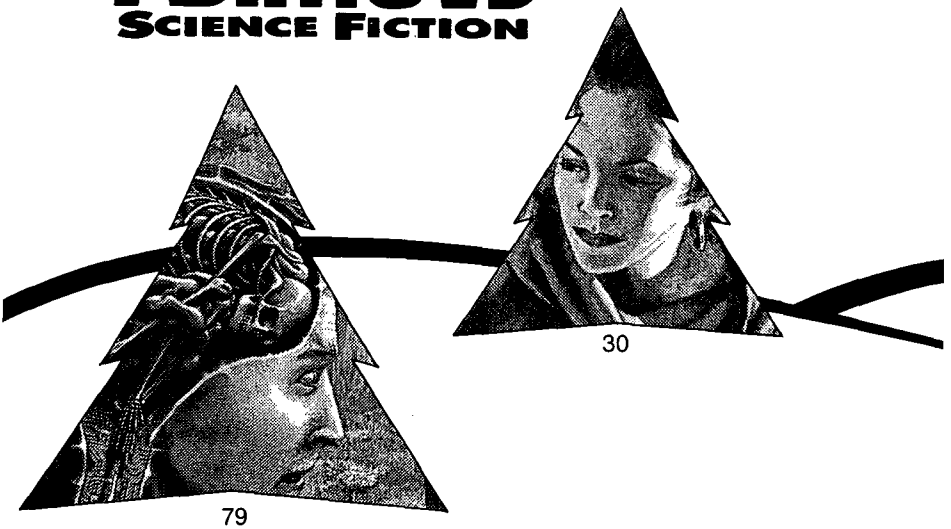
If you're under 18, your parent must sign here _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

ASI 12/92

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION



30

79

Vol. 16 No. 14 (Whole Number 194)
December 1992
Next Issue on Sale
November 10, 1992

Novelettes

30 Sepoy — Tom Purdom
56 The Man in the Red Suit — Diane Mapes
104 Second Chance — Mary Rosenblum
136 The Nutcracker Coup — Janet Kagan

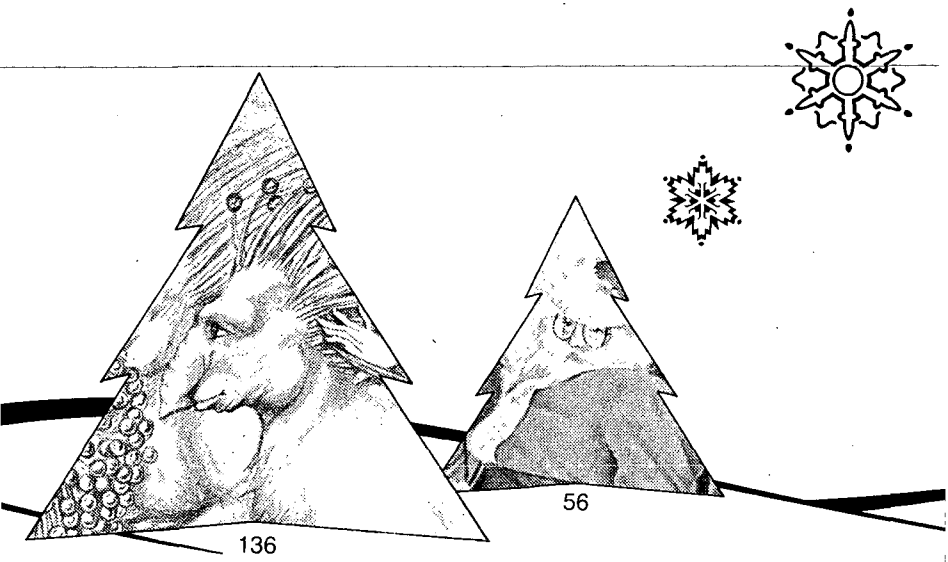
Short Stories

12 Alfred — Lisa Goldstein
79 The Walk — Greg Egan
92 Thanatrope — Mark W. Tiedemann
126 The Sound of the River — M. Shayne Bell

Poetry

28 Looking Glass — Robert Frazier & James Patrick Kelly
54 Terraforming Byzantium — Bonita Kale
90 Christmas Day, Give or Take a Week — Lawrence Schimel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Departments

4 Letters
169 On Books — Baird Searles
176 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Stories from *Asimov's* have won seventeen Hugos and nineteen Nebula awards, and our editors have received six Hugo awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

Cover for "The Nutcracker Coup" by David Cherry

Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)
Gardner Dozois: Editor
Sheila Williams: Managing Editor
Christoph Haas-Heye: President & Publisher
Terri Czeczko: Art Director

Published every 28 days which includes special issues in April and November by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 per copy ($3.25 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $40.50. (GST included in Canada) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. For back issues send $3.50 to Asimov's Science Fiction, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, ‹ 1992 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1215 Walker Road, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 2N9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov, et al:

Your editorial "The Queen's English" and the letter by Robert Schreiner in the March issue produced such an intense rush of emotion in me that I had to put the magazine down and start writing this letter. They hit *that* close to home.

Let me illustrate: I came to the United States at the age of eighteen, thinking that I had a good grasp of the English language. Imagine my dismay when an individual tried to engage me in conversation at a local bar; I couldn't understand a word he was saying! I asked the friend that had taken me there if this person was talking English and he said that of course he was. What I didn't know at the time was that he was speaking in a street version of the language. But I could not understand much of what was said on the radio or the TV either.

About six months later, working as a pot-washer at a hotel in Philadelphia, a French chef approached me in the locker room and told me bluntly: "All you Hispanics know how to do is smile all the time and wash dishes." To which I promptly replied in my halting English: "Dat's because we no know any Eengleesh." "I hear and understand your English pretty well," he countered.

This conversation took place twelve years ago, but I will never forget it. After observing my fellow Hispanics I had to agree with him. We were using the language barrier as an excuse for our lack of ambition and plain laziness. I vowed then that I would break the mold.

I am a voracious reader, so one day, not long after this conversation took place, when I found an old, much abused paperback titled *Valley of the Dolls* I took it home. then I went to the local bookstore and bought an English–Spanish dictionary. With its help, I read the book; it was the beginning of something wonderful. Later on, a friend gave me a copy of a book titled *Ringworld*, by Larry Niven. After I finished reading it, with the help of the ever-present dictionary, I was stunned. In Puerto Rico, I had read and re-read Julio Verne's books, in Spanish of course, and had constantly looked for books with a similar theme. But, alas, there were no other books like those in my neck of the woods. I didn't know, at the time, what Science fiction was. When I mentioned to my friend how much I had enjoyed Niven's book and asked him if he had any more like it, he took me to the local bookstore. In the back of the bookstore he pointed at a bookshelf. It was crammed with books from ceiling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to floor; a small plaque at the top had "Science Fiction" written on it. To say that I was as happy as a child in a candy-store is to put it mildly. I don't know how long I stayed there. I *do* know that I examined each and every book in that shelf, starting at the top with books from Asimov, Anthony, etc., to books from the likes of Zelazny at the bottom. That was one of the happiest moments (if you can call two or three hours a moment) in my life.

I bought as many books as I could afford. Since all of the names, except for Niven, were unknown to me, I used the books' covers as the only criteria for selecting them. Soon after, I discovered the Science Fiction magazines. *Asimov's* was the first. It has remained a dear and loyal friend for all these years, except for a brief time a couple of years back when I couldn't afford it, and I'll continue to read it until the day I die.

Although I know that I'll never speak or write the Queen's English, my grasp on it has improved considerably, and I have Science Fiction in general and your magazine in particular to thank for it; they have literally changed my life. I attended school, graduated at the top of the class, and went to work in the electronics field. If that French chef could see me now!

I still smile a lot, especially on my way to the bank.

From the bottom of my *corazón*, my thanks to you, Dr. Asimov, and to all those other writers who have helped make my learning of the English language such an enjoyable experience.

Jose E. Santiago
Waltham, MA

GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Managing Editor
IAN RANDAL STROCK:
Associate Editor
SCOTT L. TOWNER:
Assistant Editor
JEAN TRAINA:
Design Director
TERRI CZECZKO:
Art Director
ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer
MARILYN ROBERTS:
Senior Production Manager
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights
CONSTANCE SCARBOROUGH:
Contracts Manager
BARBARA PARROTT:
Director of Newsstand Circulation
BRUCE SCHWARTZ:
Director of Circulation Subscription Sales
DENNIS JONES:
Operations Manager Subscription Sales
DAVID MENDELSON:
Renewal & Billing Manager Subscription Sales
FRED SABLOFF:
Advertising Sales Director
JUDY DORMAN:
Advertising and Classified Advertising Coordinator

ISAAC ASIMOV
Editorial Director
(1977–1992)

CHRISTOPH HAAS-HEYE
President & Publisher
Dell Magazines

JACK HOEFT
President & CEO
Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212) 856-6306

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
Dresner Direct, Inc., N.Y., N.Y. (212)889-1078

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's*, Dell Magazines, 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dearest Doctor,

You can see my name on the letterhead, but that doesn't tell anything about me. I am seventeen years old, and have just had all four of my wisdom teeth out. Needless to say, I'm not feeling terrific. For the first time in ten years, I have decided to write you a letter and thank you for your stories. *I, Robot* was the start, and the Foundation Series have also been of great entertainment to me. Because I have read these and many other of your fine books, and received your fine magazine, I put more thought into my actions than the average highschool deadhead. Thank you for the thoughts, and for keeping some of us on an even keel.

Sean Berry
Marion, IA

Dear Isaac,

I just finished reading your February editorial, and if I may, I would like to enlighten the mother of the nine year old who wrote. I am thirteen years old, and I've been reading your work since I was ten. For the first couple of years I only read your Norby books, but about seven months ago, I began reading your other works. Since then, I have completed your Foundation series (am looking forward to the next one), *Nightfall, The Gods Themselves, Nemesis*, your Azazel collection, your collection *Winds of Change*, and I also read the book you edited *The Hugo Winners, Volume Two*, which introduced me to the works of Anne McCaffrey.

Now my point is, not once in the reading of this material did I learn any "new words," neither was I introduced to any "new concepts." Most of these words and ideas I had learned by the second or third grade. It's not like I live in a "rough neighborhood" or "big city" for that matter. I live in a rural area, and I go to school in a town with about twenty- to twenty-five-thousand residents. I go to a "nice" school, but that does not mean there is no foul language or sex talk.

Frankly, if that woman thinks that censoring all reading material that enters her house will keep her daughter from learning these things, she is living in a dream world. Any child who rides a school bus will know these things by age eight.

If the mother tries to further shield her child from these "bad influences," she might send her to a private school. Sorry, but I went to a private school in kindergarten, and I heard my share of profanities.

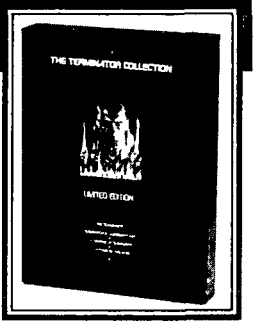
The only way I can think of for this woman to thoroughly protect her child from these influences is to teach her at home, and move into a shack out in the woods with no phone lines and no electricity. This, in all probability, would lead to an inability to adjust to life in the real world, if her mother ever let her child go out into the real world.

I would also like to say that I have not found any of your magazine's stories that were so offensive that I stopped reading it.

I would like to congratulate you and the rest of the editorial staff on an excellent magazine. I look forward to it every month, and as soon as I get it, I sit down and read it cover to cover. I'm also looking forward to meeting some of your read-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE LIMITED EDITION TERMINATOR COLLECTION



He's Back! Arnold Schwarzenegger is the Terminator and he's ready to heat up your holiday season in a one-of-a-kind, limited edition, collection. **The Terminator, Terminator 2: Judgement Day, The Making Of The Terminator Sagas,** and an exclusive book written by Director James Cameron which contains a behind-the-scenes look, interesting anecdotes and full color photos. Plus, each collection carries a Limited Edition Hologram Seal on the cover which brings you face to face with The Terminator.

The best valued collector's set ever to be released, **The Limited Edition Terminator Collection** is destined to be a collectible for years to come.

He may be back, but not for long, so order your special edition now while supplies last. **#LV48946 $59.98**

For Visa, MC, Discover orders, call toll-free 24 Hours:

1-800-326-1977, ext. IA212

Or send your name, address with check or money order for $59.98 plus $5.95 shipping and handling to:
Terminator Collection, 100 Fusion Way, Dept. IA212, Country Club Hills, IL 60478.
Canadian orders must add $5.00 S & H and pay in U.S. funds.
(Please note: Illinois residents must add 7% state sales tax.)

LIVE HOME VIDEO

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ers through the magazine's on-line service, which I will be joining.

Jessica Stilwell
Ochlocknee, GA

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Today I sent in a check to extend my subscription to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* from December 1992 to December 1994. It may have been twenty years ago that I thought science fiction might have no further to go and stopped reading it for a while. What a wonderful surprise to come back 10 years later (after re-reading the SF classics) and discover that current science fiction was limitless and kept on opening and expanding one's mind more than ever! Just think of Hans Wessolowski's unbeatable art in Doc Smith's unsurpassable space novels; Morey, Paul and Briggs illustrating Jack Williamson's *Stone from the Green Star* or G. Peyton Wertenbaker's *The Chamber of Life* (which introduced me to Grieg). Yet today we have the various and superb interpretations of Janet Aulisio, Laura Lakey, Gary Freeman, and on and on for the likes of Lucius Shepard's classic "The Fundamental Things," Nancy Kress, Kim Stanley Robinson's "A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations," Pat Cadigan, Mary Rosenblum, James Patrick Kelly—all also unsurpassable in their various ways. And kicking our imaginations further, comes "Fin de Cyclé" by Howard Waldrop in the Mid-December 1991 *Asimov's* and who is this Nicholas Jainschigg illustrating the cover and inside so justrightly? Here is "my" Marcel Proust, Rousseau, Méliès, Erik Satie, "Pablo," even Dreyfus, Zola and others, on all but forgotten "ordinaries!" Where will it all end? It won't! Felicitations to your staff, editorial, and "supporting," and to all your writers and artists, past, present, and future! They and all of us may yet be the solution to our own-created world and personal problems!

Richard G. Kerlin
Barefoot Bay, FL

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your editorial on "Freedom" in the February 1992 issue of *Asimov's* deserves a few additional comments. Comments not about the word "freedom" alone, but as it is used when connected to "from," "of," "to," etc.

The mother who wrote to you wanted FREEDOM FROM explaining to her daughter. She wanted her daughter to have FREEDOM FROM having to make choices. Her family wants the FREEDOM FROM disagreements. They feel they have the FREEDOM TO declare the same freedoms for everyone else, as long as everyone else would make the same choices as they—if there were choices to be made.

Too many parents today want the FREEDOM FROM saying "NO" to their children. Saying "NO" creates discord and disturbance, and is insufferable. Since the parents cannot say "NO" to their children, is it any wonder "Just Say NO" has such little effect on our youth? If parents cannot say "NO" to the children, how can we expect the children to say "NO" to themselves or their peers?

If there are no mature reading

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

materials in the house, the mother has no need to say "No, you may not read this."

(Notice, "mature" as opposed to the so-called "adult" in its common usage today.)

(When my twelve-year-old daughter found me reading *The Exorcist*, she asked to read it when I finished. I said "No, you are too young." About a week later she let it slip that she had read a friend's copy. She expected me to blow up, and was disappointed when I didn't, until I explained, "I don't care if you read the book—I just wanted you to be aware that there were reasons to be cautious in its reading." Then we discussed the book. I wanted her to have the FREEDOM TO make her own choices.)

If there were only one religion, parents would have FREEDOM FROM the pain of explaining the details of their religion and justifying why that religion is better than another.

Our country's freedom was won by people willing to think, willing to discipline themselves and their children. We now have people proud of their FREEDOM FROM thought, FREEDOM FROM disciplining themselves or their children.

They want FREEDOM FROM experience, not our pioneers' dream of FREEDOM TO experience.

Neal H. Krape

Dear Gardner Dozois,

I have just finished filling out my Reader's Ballot for 1991 and as always I had a hard time limiting my choices to three in each category. (I liked it a few years ago when you allowed six votes per category.) Therefore, I thought I'd send this letter praising some of the other stories I particularly liked in the past year. My votes for novellas went to "Beggars in Spain" by Nancy Kress, "The Fourth Intercometary" by Phillip C. Jennings, and "Jack" by Connie Willis. "Beggars in Spain" was an easy choice for first. This story does wonderfully what the best SF does: ask hard questions about important things, illuminate the question with a situation which arises naturally from a solid extrapolative (or speculative) idea, and make the reader think about the answer, along with the characters. After "Beggars in Spain," though, I had a list of six stories among which it was very hard to choose: the two mentioned plus "Candle" by Tony Daniel, "And Wild for to Hold" by Nancy Kress, "The Breath of Suspension" by Alexander Jablokov, and "The Gallery of His Dreams" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Tony Daniel is certainly a promising new author.

My votes for novelettes were: "White Chaos" by Michael Kallenberger, "Fin de Cyclé" by Howard Waldrop, and "Venus Rising on Water" by Tanith Lee, but I could just as easily have listed "The Happy Man" by Jonathan Lethem, "In Numbers" by Greg Egan, "Miracle" by Connie Willis, "An Outpost of the Empire" by Robert Silverberg, or "A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations," by Kim Stanley Robinson. I had five or six additional stories starred, as well.

For short stories, my choices were "Vinland the Dream" by Kim Stanley Robinson, "Wanting to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Talk to You" by Kathleen Ann Goonan, and "The Odor of Cocktail Cigarettes" by Ian Watson, "In the Late Cretaceous" by Connie Willis, "Billy Hauser" by Don Webb, "Sweetheart" by Kathleen Alcalá, and "Robot Visions" by Isaac Asimov.

That list includes a number of long-time favorites of mine (Willis, Robinson, Jablokov, Lee, Silverberg, Waldrop) but also some newer writers. In particular, Greg Egan and Phillip Jennings have published a number of exciting and different (different for Jennings being different indeed!) stories in the last couple of years, and I'd certainly like to recommend that you get as many of those people's stories as you can! I'd also like to commend the Good Doctor Asimov for what seems to be a renaissance of late. After years of mainly Azazel stories (pleasant but mighty slight) and Foundation novels (very readable, but philosophically disappointing, even irritating), I've seen several recent stories that have been quite impressive ("Kid Brother," "Too Bad!" "Gold," and the above-mentioned "Robot Visions"). Thanks for publishing an enjoyable magazine, still the best of the SF magazines.

Richard R. Horton
Richmond Heights, MO

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is my ballot for your sixth annual reader's awards. You may notice poetry is unmarked. This is not because I don't enjoy the poetry, I do. It's just I choose not to vote for this category.

I am including a letter to protest the leaving out of the category of series. I suppose this was done because there was only one serialized story this year, Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide.* After all the debate about this story I was looking forward to supporting it with my vote as one of the best of the year.

I get my *Asimov's* from the local magazine shop. When I thought I had missed the last installment of Swanwick's novel I combed all the area shops looking for a copy. I had to know how it ended. I found my copy and wasn't disappointed. Nor was I surprised by all the uproar it caused. Some of the greatest books ever written are on someone's banned-books list. We all forget that art isn't pretty. Challenge people's minds and someone will complain about it.

Swanwick's novel may have been left out because it appeared in issues covering both 1990 and 1991. I can understand why it may have been left out; but as a writer and a reader I feel doubly cheated by not being able to vote for this novel. It's unfair to your readers and Michael Swanwick to leave his work out of the voting.

Hopefully the wise editors of your fine publication will find a way to rectify this situation in the future. Until then mark me down as a supporter of Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide.*

Kayleen Reynolds
Vermillion, SD

We appreciate your enthusiastic support for Michael Swanwick's Stations of the Tide. *The novel recently won the Nebula award and it is currently a finalist for the Hugo.*

—Sheila Williams

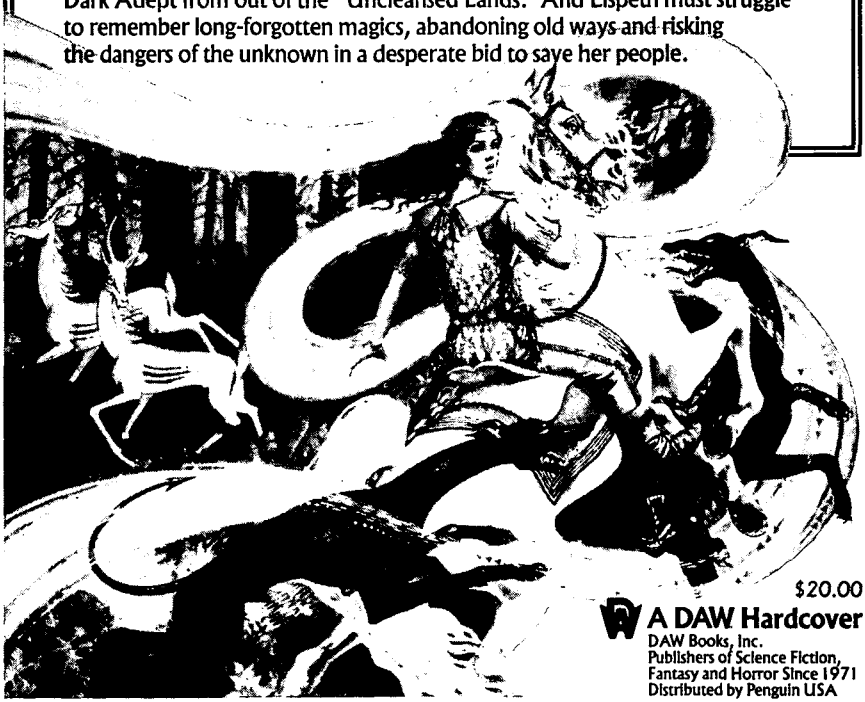
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The blockbuster sequel to the breakout hardcover bestseller, WINDS OF FATE

MERCEDES LACKEY
WINDS OF CHANGE

Book Two of the *Mage Winds Trilogy*

The kingdom of Valdemar is imperiled by the dark magic of Ancar of Hardorn, and Princess Elspeth, Herald and heir to the throne, has gone on a desperate quest in search of a mentor who can teach her to wield her fledgling mage-powers. But instead she is whirled into a maelstrom of war and sorcery as the Clan she has sought is attacked by a mysterious Dark Adept from out of the "Uncleansed Lands." And Elspeth must struggle to remember long-forgotten magics, abandoning old ways and risking the dangers of the unknown in a desperate bid to save her people.



$20.00

A DAW Hardcover

DAW Books, Inc.
Publishers of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Since 1971
Distributed by Penguin USA

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lisa Goldstein tells us that the following quietly moving story, "is part wish-fulfillment, part memorial for a man who died before I was born, but whom I always wanted to meet." We consider ourselves fortunate that she's given *us* the chance to meet . . .

ALFRED

Lisa Goldstein

art: Laurie Harden

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alison walked slowly through the park near school. Usually she went to Laura's house after school let out, but on Fridays Laura had a Girl Scout meeting. She passed a few older boys playing basketball, two women pushing baby strollers. Bells from the distant clock-tower rang out across the park: five o'clock, still too early to go home.

A leaf fell noiselessly to the path in front of her. The sun broke through the dark edge of the clouds and illuminated a spider web on one of the trees, making it shine like a gate of jewels. A spotted dog, loping alone down the path, looked back and grinned at her as if urging her on. She followed after it.

An old man sat on a bench ahead of her, his eyes closed and his face turned toward the sun.

If Laura had been here they'd be whispering together about everyone, laughing over their made-up stories. The two women would have had their babies switched at the hospital, and they would pass each other without ever knowing how close they were to their true children. The old man was a spy, of course.

As Alison walked by the man she saw that his face and hands were pale, almost transparent. At that moment he opened his eyes and said, "I wonder—Could you please tell me the time?"

He had a slight accent, like her parents. Her guess had been right after all—he *was* a spy. "Five o'clock," she said.

"Ah. And the year?"

This was much too weird; the man had to be crazy. Alison glanced around, acting casual but at the same time looking for someone to run to if things got out of hand. You weren't supposed to talk to strangers, she knew that. Her mother told her so all the time.

But what could this man do to her here, in front of all these people? And she had to admit that his question intrigued her—most adults asked you if you liked school and didn't seem to know where to go from there. "It's 1967," she said. Somehow his strange question made it all right to ask him one in return. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, you know how it is. We old people, we can never remember anything."

She tried to study him without being obvious. She'd been right about his accent: it sounded German, like her parents'. He had a narrow face and high forehead, with thinning black hair brushed back from his face. He wore glasses with John Lennon wire frames—very cool, Alison thought.

But other than the glasses, which he'd probably had forever, there wasn't anything fashionable about him. He had on a thin black tie and his coat was nearly worn through in places.

He pushed back his sleeves. Nothing up my sleeves, Alison thought.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then she saw the numbers tattooed on his arm, and she looked away. Her parents had numbers like that.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She shook her head; she wasn't going to fall for that one. "My mother told me never to talk to strangers," she said.

"Your mother is a very smart woman. My mother never told me anything like that. My name is Alfred."

"Aren't you supposed to offer me candy now?" Alison said.

"Candy? Why?"

"That's the other thing my mother said. Strangers would try to give me candy."

He rummaged in his pockets as if searching for something. Alison saw with relief that his coat sleeves had fallen back over his arms, covering the tattoo. "I don't have any candy. All I have here is a pocket-watch. What would your mother say to that?"

He brought out a round gold watch. The letter "A" was engraved on it, the ends of the letter looping and curling around each other. Her initial, his initial. She reached for the watch but he moved it away from her and pressed the knob on top to open it. It had stopped hours ago.

"Aren't you going to wind it?" she asked.

"It's broken," he said. "I can tell you an interesting story about this watch, if you want to hear it."

She hesitated. She didn't want to hear about concentration camps; people—adults—got too strange when they talked about their experiences. It made her uncomfortable. Terrible things weren't supposed to happen to your parents; your parents were supposed to protect you.

On the other hand, she didn't want to go home just yet. "Okay," she said. She was almost certain now that he was harmless, but just to be safe she wouldn't sit on the bench next to him. She could probably outrun him anyway.

"My parents gave this watch to me a long time ago," he said. "I used to carry it with me wherever I went, and bring it out and look at it." He pried open the back and showed her a photograph of a dark-eyed boy and girl who looked a little like her and her brother Joey. But this back opened as well, revealing a small world of gears and springs and levers, all placed one over the other in careful layers, all unaccountably stopped.

"I took the watch down to the river once. I had my own place there where no one could find me, where I would sit and think and dream. That day I was dreaming that someday I would learn how to make a watch like this. Someday I would find out its secrets."

He fell silent. The sun glinted over the watch in his hand. "And did you?" she asked, to bring him back from wherever he had gone.

He didn't seem to hear her. "And then the angel came," he said. "Do

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

KING OF THE DEAD
Book 2 in the Lens of the World
by R.A. MacAvoy

The second volume in a new fantasy series destined to become a classic — from the author of *Tea With the Black Dragon*. Named one of the five most important SF novels of 1991 by *The New York Times Book Review*.

BUDDY HOLLY IS ALIVE
AND WELL ON GANYMEDE
by Bradley Denton

A contemporary SF extravaganza involving alien invaders, a cyborg dog, a cross-country chase and Buddy Holly broadcasting live from a moon of Jupiter.

THE ISLAND AND THE RING
by Laura C. Stevenson

In the tradition of Robin McKinley and Ursula LeGuin comes a beautifully written tale of a young woman's quest to stop the sorcerer who usurped her father's kingdom.

MIRROR TO THE SKY
by Mark Geston

Acclaimed SF author Mark Geston makes a stellar reentry into the world of stunningly realized speculative fiction — offering a startling vision of an extraordinary future.

An Avonova Book/William Morrow Hardcover

COMING IN DECEMBER 1992

AVONOVA

AVON BOOKS
The Hearst Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you know, I had thought angels were courteous, kind. This one had a force of some sort, a terrifying energy I could feel even from where I sat. His eyes were fierce as stars. I thought he asked me a question, asked me if I desired anything, anything in the world, but in that confused instant I could not think of a thing I wanted. I was completely content. And so he left me.

"I looked down at the watch, which I still held in my hand, but it had stopped. And no one in the world has ever been able to make it start again."

He looked at her as if expecting a reply. But all she could think of was that her first thought had been correct; he was crazy after all. No one in her family believed in angels. Still, what if—what if his story were true?

"But I think the angel granted my desire," he said. He nodded slowly. "Do you know, I think he did."

The shadows of the trees had grown longer while he'd talked to her; it was later than she'd thought. "I've got to go now," she said reluctantly. "My parents are expecting me."

"Come again," he said. "I'm in the park nearly every day."

The bus was just pulling out when she got to the bus stop; she had to wait for the next one and got home just as her father and Joey were sitting down to dinner. Her mother carried plates filled with chicken and potatoes into the dining room. She frowned as Alison came in; it was a family rule that everyone had to be on time for dinner.

Her mother sat and her parents began to eat. Joey looked from one parent to the other uncertainly. Finally he said, "What happens to planes when they crash?"

Alison could see that he was trying to be casual, but he had obviously been worrying about the question all day. "What do you mean?" Alison's father said.

"Well, like when they fall. Where do they land?"

Her mother sighed. Joey was six, and afraid of everything. He refused to get on an elevator because he thought the cable would break. When they went walking he tried to stay with their parents at all times, and would grow anxious if he couldn't see them. Sometimes at night Alison heard screams coming from his room, his nightmares waking him up.

"I mean, could they land on the house?" he said. "Could they come through my bedroom?"

"No, of course not," Alison's father said. "The pilots try to land where there aren't any people."

"Well, but it could happen, couldn't it? What if—if they just fall?"

"Look," Alison's father said. "Let's say that this piece of chicken is the plane. Okay? And your plate here is where the plane comes down." Speaking carefully, his accent only noticeable as a slight gentleness on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the "r" and "th" sounds, he took his son through a pretended plane crash. "Past where all the people live, see?" he said.

Joey nodded, but Alison saw that the answer didn't satisfy him. Their father was a psychologist, and Alison knew that it frustrated him not to be able to cure Joey's nightmares. He had told her once that he had studied to become a rabbi before the war, but that after he had been through the camps he had lost his faith in God and turned to psychology. It had made her uncomfortable to hear that her father didn't believe in God.

"He had another nightmare last night," her mother said softly.

"I don't know what it is," her father said. "We try to make a safe place here for the kids. They're in no danger here. I don't understand why he's so frightened all the time."

"Eat your dinner before it gets cold, Alison," her mother said, noticing for the first time that Alison had not touched her food. "There was a time when I would have given anything to have just one bite of what you're turning down now."

The next day, Saturday, Alison called Laura and told her about the old man in the park. She wanted to go back and talk to him again, but Laura said she was crazy. "He's some kind of pervert or something, I bet," Laura said. "Didn't your parents tell you not to talk to strangers?"

"He's not—"

"Why don't you come over here instead?"

Alison liked going to Laura's house, liked her parents and the rest of the family. They were Jewish, the same as her family, but Laura's grandfather had come to America before the war. To Alison that made them exotic, different. They seemed to laugh more, for one thing. "Okay," she said.

The minute Alison stepped into the house Laura's mother called Laura to the phone, then disappeared on some errand of her own. No one had invited Alison farther in than the living room. She looked around her, hoping the call wouldn't last long. In the next room Laura laughed and said something about the Girl Scout meeting.

The furniture in the living room was massive and overstuffed: a couch, two easy chairs, a coffee table and several end tables. A grandfather clock ticked noisily in the corner of the room, and opposite it stood a clunky old-fashioned television that Alison knew to be black and white.

For the first time she noticed the profusion of photographs, what looked like hundreds of them, spread out over the mantelpiece and several end tables. All of them had heavy, ornate frames, and doilies to protect the surfaces under them. Curious, she went over to the mantelpiece to get a closer look.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Most were black and white, groups of children bunched around a stern-looking mother and father. Everyone stared straight ahead, unsmiling. The fathers wore fancy evening clothes Alison had never seen outside of movies, and sometimes a top hat and even a walking cane. The mothers wore dresses covering them from head to foot, yards and yards of flowing, shiny material. In one of the pictures the children were all dressed alike, the girls in dark dresses and bows and the boys in coats and shorts.

A trembling hand came over her shoulder and pointed to a small boy in the front row. She turned quickly. Laura's grandfather stood there, leaning on his cane, his eyes watery behind thick glasses.

"That's me," he said. Alison looked back at the photograph, trying to see this ancient man in the picture of the young boy. The shaking finger moved to another kid in the same picture. "And that's my brother Moishe."

He looked at down her, uncertain. His face was flushed now, suffused with blood, a waxy yellow mixed with red. His eyes were vacant; something had gone out of them.

The clock sounded loud in the room. Finally he said, "Which one are you?"

"What?"

"Which one of these are you? You're one of the cousins, aren't you?"

"No, I'm—I'm Alison—"

"Alice? I don't know an Alice. That's me in that picture there, and that's my brother Moishe. Or did I already tell you that?"

Should she tell him? She was unused to dealing with old people; all her grandparents had died in the war. But just then he seemed to pull himself together, to concentrate; she could see the man he used to be before he got old.

"Moishe played the trombone—it was a way of getting out of the army in Russia. If you played an instrument you could be in the marching band. He played for anyone, Moishe did, any army in the world. He didn't care. The only army he ever quit was the White Russians. You know why?"

Alison shook her head.

"Because they made their band march in front of them in the war," the old man said. He laughed loudly.

Alison laughed too. "What happened to him?"

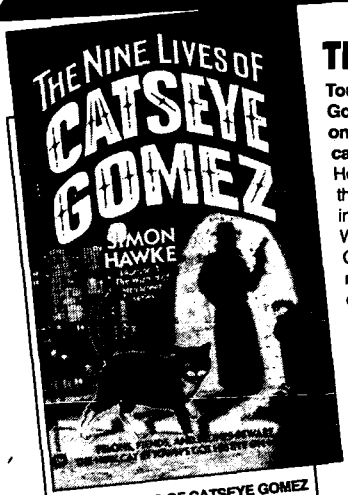
The old man started to cough.

"Hi, Alison," Laura said. Alison turned; she hadn't heard Laura come in. "Let's go to my room. I got a new record yesterday."

As they walked up the stairs Laura said, "God, he's embarrassing. Sometimes he calls my mother by her maiden name—he thinks she's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEWS FROM Questar



THE NINE LIVES OF CATSEYE GOMEZ
by Simon Hawke
Cover art by David Mattingly
0-446-36241-7 $4.99 (In Canada: $5.99)

THERE'S A NEW CAT IN TOWN!

Tough-talking feline and exemplary Private Eye Catseye Gomez, last seen in *The Wizard of Santa Fe*, strikes out on his own in a brand-new novel of magic, mystery, and catastrophy!

He's a gumshoe kitty with a nose for murder, and a mouth that runs on overtime! Now, Catseye Gomez has set up shop in the Mile High City, and Denver will never be the same. When a beautiful young newscaster is killed by a car bomb, Catseye joins forces with her sexy calico, Princess, and a rebel cop named Leventhal. In a future filled with magic and danger, peopled with political wackos, religious nuts, media weasels, talking snakes, gutter sorcerers and wannabe wizards, Catseye's on a deadly cat-and-mouse hunt for a killer!

ALSO READ:

The Wizard of Santa Fe
0-446-36194-1/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.99)

The Wizard of Rue Morgue
0-445-20740-3/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.95)

The Wizard of Whitechapel
0-445-20304-8/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.95)

The Samurai Wizard
0-446-36132-1/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.95)

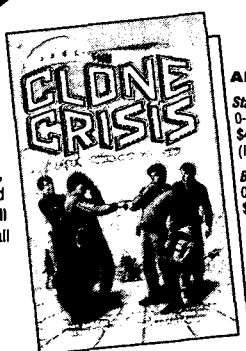
The Wizard of Sunset Strip
0-445-20702-7/$3.95
(In Canada: $4.95)

ALSO THIS MONTH:

Conek and his robot sidekick Cge, the heroes of *Ghoster*, *Backblast*, and *Starfire Down*, are back in a rollicking new interplanetary adventure!

When crime lords Hinkle Wirt and Verd Mantua clone the leaders of a smuggling empire, as well as Conek and his band of intergallactic adventurers, multiple problems emerge...as good clones, bad clones and confused originals vie for domination. All have the same skills, memories, and faces. And all are determined to be the only survivors...

THE CLONE CRISIS by Lee McKeone
Cover art by James Warhola
0-446-36321-9 $4.99 (In Canada: $5.99)



ALSO READ:

Starfire Down
0-446-36137-2
$4.95
(In Canada: $5.95)

Backblast
0-445-20622-5
$3.95
(In Canada: $4.95)

Ghoster
0-445-20620-9
$3.50
(In Canada: $4.50)

AVAILABLE AT BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE WARNER BOOKS

A Time Warner Company Questar is a registered trademark of Warner Books, Inc. ©1992 Warner Books, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

still a kid. My dad wants to put him in a nursing home but she won't let him. I hope he didn't bother you too much."

"No," Alison said. She felt something she couldn't name, a feeling like longing. "He's okay."

She didn't get a chance to go back to the park for another week, until Friday. Laura had remained firm about not wanting to meet Alfred. But when she finally got there she couldn't see him anywhere. Her heart sank. Why had she listened to Laura? Why hadn't she insisted?

No, wait—there he was, sitting on the same bench, his head tilted back toward the sun. He looked thin, frail, even more transparent than the first time she'd seen him. She hurried toward him.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Here she is—the child without a name," he said. "I was afraid you would not come again. I thought your mother might have told you not to talk to me."

"She doesn't know," Alison said.

"Ah. You should not keep secrets from your mother, you know that. But if you do, you should make sure that they are good ones."

Alison laughed. "Got any candy?"

"No, no candy." He looked around him, seeming to realize only then where he was. "Do you want to take a walk?"

"Sure."

He stood and they went down a shaded path. Alison shuffled through the fallen leaves; she wondered how Alfred managed to walk so quietly. Ahead of them, where the path came out into the sun, she saw a man with an ice cream cart, and she thought for a moment that Alfred might have intended to buy her a sweet after all. But they passed the cart without stopping, and she realized, ashamed, that he probably didn't have much money. "Do you want some ice cream?" she asked.

He laughed. "Thank you, no. I eat very little these days."

The path fell back into shade again. At the end of the path stood the old broken carousel, with a chain-link fence around it so that children could not play on it. Alfred stood and looked at it for a long time. "I made something like this once," he said.

"Really? Carousel animals?"

"No, not the animals. The—what do you call it? The mechanism that makes the thing go around." He moved his hand in a slow circle to demonstrate.

"Could you fix this?"

"Could I?" He looked at the carousel for a long time, studying the tilting floor, the cracked and leaning animals, the proud horse on which someone had carved "Freddy & Janet." Dirt and cobwebs had dulled the animals' paint. "How long has it been broken?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't know. It's been like this since I started coming to the park."

"I think I can fix it, yeah," he said. He pronounced it "Yah," just like her parents. "Yah, probably I could. Mostly I made large figures that moved. A king and a queen who came out like this"—he moved his hands together—"and kissed. And a magician who opened a box, and there was nothing inside it, and then he closed it, and opened it again, and there was a dove that flew away. I made that one for the Kaiser. Do you know who the Kaiser was?"

She shook her head.

"He was the king. The king of Germany."

"Did you have any kids?" she asked, thinking how great it would be to have a father like this man, and remembering the photograph of the two children in his watch. But almost immediately she wished she hadn't said anything. What if his children had died in the war, like so many of her parents' relatives?

"I did, yah," he said. "A boy and a girl. I wanted them to take over the business when I retired. It was a funny thing, though—they didn't want to."

"They were nuts," Alison said. "I would have done it in a minute."

"Ah, but you would have needed more than an interest in the figures. You would have had to understand electricity, and how the mechanisms work, and mathematics. . . . Both my children were terrible at mathematics."

She was terrible at mathematics too. But she thought that if she had been given a chance at the kind of work Alfred did she would have studied until she understood everything there was to know.

She could almost see his workshop in front of her, the gears and chains and hinges, the tall wooden cabinets filled with hands and silver hair, tin stars, carved dogs, and trumpets. The king and queen lay on their sides like fallen wooden angels, wearing robes of silk and gauze, and wooden crowns with gaudy paste jewels. The bird hung from the ceiling, waiting for its place inside the magician's box. All around Alfred apprentices were cutting into wood, or doing something incomprehensible with pieces of machinery. She thought that she could even smell the wood; it had the elusive scent of great trees, like a forest from a childhood fairy tale.

She turned back to Alfred. What had happened? The day had grown cold; she saw the sun set through the trees, dazzling her vision. "I've got to go home," she said. "I'll be late for dinner."

"Oh. I hope I have not bored you terribly. I don't get much of a chance to talk."

"No," she said. "Oh, no."

She hurried down the path, shivering in the first real cold of the year.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Once she looked back but Alfred had vanished among the shadows of the trees and the carousel.

Her parents and Joey were already eating dinner when she got home. "Where do you go on Fridays?" her mother said as she sat down. "Doesn't Laura have her Girl Scout meeting today?"

"I don't go anywhere," Alison said.

"You know you're not supposed to be late for dinner. And what about your homework?"

"Come on, Mom—it's Friday."

"That's right, it's Friday. Remember how long it took you to do your math homework last week? If you start now you'll have it done on time."

"We didn't get very much. I can do the whole thing on Sunday."

"Can you? I want to see it after dinner."

Her father looked at her mother. Sometimes Alison thought her father might be on her side in the frequent arguments she had with her mother, but that he didn't feel he had the right to interrupt. Now he laughed and said to her mother, "What would you know about math homework? You told me you didn't understand anything past addition and subtraction."

"Well, then, you look at it," her mother said. "I want to make sure she gets it done this time. And maybe you can ask her where she goes after school. I don't think she's telling me the truth."

Alison looked down at her plate. What did her mother know? Sometimes she made shrewd guesses based on no evidence at all. She said nothing.

"Mrs. Smith says she saw you talking to an old man in the park," her mother said.

Alison didn't look up. Didn't Mrs. Smith have anything better to do than spy on everyone in the neighborhood?

"When I was your age I knew enough not to talk to strangers," her mother said. "The Gestapo came after my father—did I ever tell you that?"

Alison nodded miserably. She didn't want to hear the story again.

"They came to our house in Germany and asked for my father," her mother said. "I was twelve or thirteen then, just about your age. This was before they started sending Jews to the camps without a reason, and someone had overheard my father say something treasonous about Hitler. My mother said my father wasn't home.

"But he was home—he was up in the attic, hiding. What do you think would have happened if I'd talked to the Gestapo the way you talk to this man in the park? If I'd said, 'Oh, yes, Officer, he's up in the attic'? I was only twelve and I knew enough not to say anything. You kids are so stupid, so pampered, living here."

It wasn't the same thing, Alison thought, realizing it for the first time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ISAAC ASIMOV & ROBERT SILVERBERG

Two science fiction legends—one unforgettable story.

THE UGLY LITTLE BOY

Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg join forces to create a powerful new novel based on Asimov's classic short story about a Neanderthal child transported to the 21st century. Past and present collide in this fascinating tale of two worlds separated by 40,000 years, yet alike in more ways than any of their inhabitants could imagine.

FOUNDATION

Doubleday

Available wherever books are sold

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Germany and the United States weren't the same countries. And Alfred had been in the camps too; he and her mother were on the same side. But she felt the weight of her mother's experience and couldn't say anything. Her mother had seen so much more than she had, after all.

"We escaped to Holland, stayed with relatives," her mother said. "And eight years later the Nazis invaded Holland and took us to concentration camps. My father worked for a while as an electrician, but finally he died of typhus. All of that, and he died anyway."

Her mother's voice held the bitterness Alison had heard all her life. Now she sighed and shook her head. Alison wanted to do something for her, to make everything all right. But what could she do, after all? She was only twelve.

She took the bus back to the park the next day. Alfred sat on his usual bench, his eyes closed and turned toward the sun. She dropped down on the bench next to him.

"Tell me a story," she said.

He opened his eyes slowly, as if uncertain where he was. Then he smiled. "You look sad," he said. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah. My mother doesn't want me to talk to you anymore."

"Why not?"

This was tricky. She couldn't say that her mother had compared him to the Gestapo. She couldn't talk about the camps at all with him; she never wanted to hear that note of bitterness and defeat come into his voice. Alfred was hers, her escape from the fears and sadness she had lived with all her life. He had nothing to do with what went on between Alison and her mother.

He was looking at her with curiosity and concern now, expecting her to say something. "It's not you. She doesn't trust most people," Alison said.

"Do you know why?"

"Yeah." His eyes were deep brown, she noticed, like hers, like her mother's. Why not tell him, after all? "She—she has a number on her arm. Like yours."

He nodded.

"And she—well, she went through a bad time, I guess." It felt strange to think of her mother as a kid. "She said the Gestapo came after her father when she was my age. She said he had to hide in the attic."

To her surprise Alfred started to nod. "I bet it was crowded in that attic too. Boxes and boxes of junk—I bet they never threw anything away. Probably hot too. But then who knew that someday someone would have to hide in it?"

At first his words made no sense whatsoever. Then she said, slowly,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You're him, aren't you? You're her father. My—my grandfather." The unfamiliar word felt strange on her tongue.

"What?" He seemed to rouse himself. "Your grandfather? I'm a crazy old man you met in the park."

"She said he died. You died. You're a ghost." She was whispering now. Chills kept coming up her spine, wave after wave of them. The sun looked cold and very far away.

He laughed. "A ghost? Is that what you think I am?"

She nodded reluctantly, not at all certain now.

"Listen to me," he said. "You're right about your mother—she went through a bad time. And it's hard for her to understand you, to understand what you're going through. Sometimes she's jealous of you."

"Jealous?"

"Sure, jealous. You never had to distrust people, or hide from them. You never went hungry, or saw anyone you loved killed. She thinks it's easy for you—she doesn't understand that you have problems too."

"She called me stupid. She said I would have talked to the Gestapo, would have told them where my father was. But I never would have done that."

"No. It was unfair of her to say that. She wants you to think of the world the way she does, as an unsafe place. But you have to make up your own mind about what the world is like."

She was nodding even before he had finished. "Yeah. Yeah, that's what I thought, only I couldn't say it. Because she's been through so much more than I have, so everything she thinks seems so important. I couldn't tell her that what happens to me is important too."

"No, and you might never be able to tell her. But you'll know it, and I'll know it too."

"What was your father's name?" Alison asked her mother that night at dinner. Joey stopped eating and gave her a pleading look; he was old enough to know that she was taking the conversation in a dangerous direction.

"Alfred," her mother said. "Why do you ask?"

There were probably a lot of old men named Alfred running around. Did she only think he was her grandfather because she wanted what Laura had, wanted someone to tell her family stories, to connect her with her past?

"Oh, I don't know," she said, trying to keep her voice casual. "I was wondering about him, that's all. Do you have a picture of him?"

"What do you think—we were allowed to take photographs with us to the camps?" The bitterness was back in her mother's voice. "We lost everything."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, what did he look like?"

"He was—I don't know. A thin man, with black hair. He brushed it back, I remember that."

"Did he wear glasses?"

Her mother looked up at that. "Yah, he did. How did you know?"

"Oh, you know," Alison said quickly. "Laura's grandfather has glasses, so I thought . . . What did he do?"

"I named you after him," her mother said. "I wanted a name that started with A." To Alison's great astonishment, she began to laugh. "He told that story about the attic all the time, when we lived in Holland. How crowded it was. He said my mother never threw anything away." She took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. "He made it sound like the funniest thing that ever happened to him."

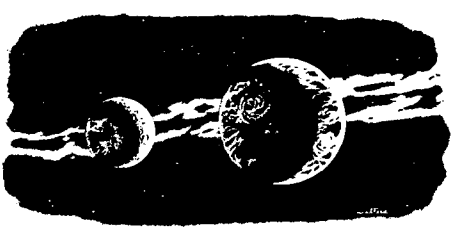
Alison walked slowly through the park. It was Sunday and dozens of families had come out for the last warmth of the year, throwing frisbees, barbecuing hamburgers in the fire pits. Joey held her hand tightly, afraid to let go.

She began to hurry, pushing her way through the crowds. Had she scared Alfred off by guessing his secret? She knew what he was now. He had drifted the way Laura's grandfather sometimes drifted, had forgotten his own time and had slipped somehow into hers. Or maybe this was the one wish the angel had granted him, the wish he hadn't known he wanted. However it had happened he had come to her, singled her out. She had a grandfather after all.

But what if she was wrong? What if he was just a lonely old man who needed someone to talk to?

There he was, up ahead. She ran toward him. "Hey," Joey said anxiously. "Hey, wait a minute."

"Hi," Alison said to the old man, a little breathless. "I've decided to tell you my name. My name's Alison, and I was named after my grandfather Alfred. And this is my brother Joey. Joey's afraid of things. I thought you might talk to him." ●



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

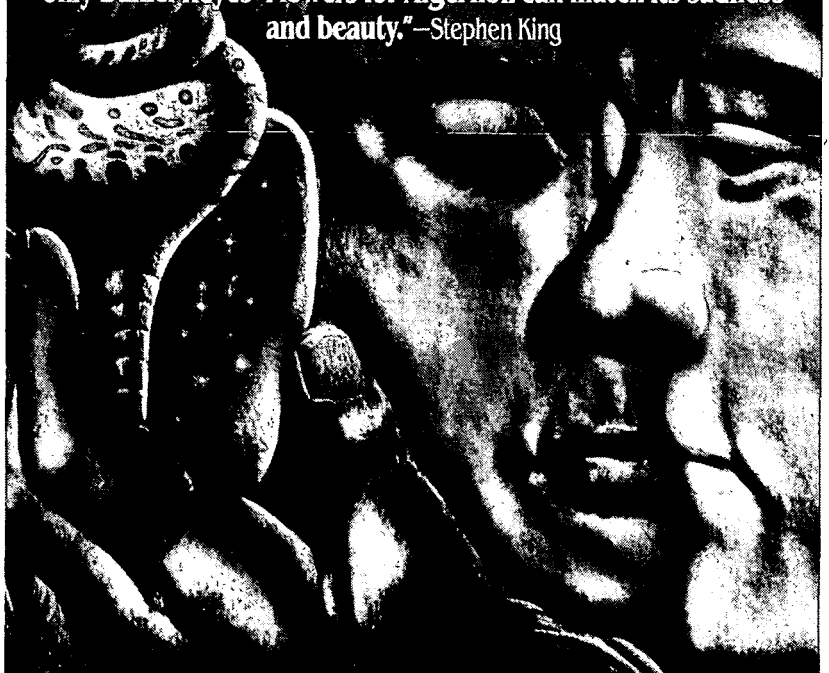
One man's unforgettable journey across the dark landscape of the human mind.

DAN SIMMONS

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *HYPERION* AND *SUMMER OF NIGHT*

THE HOLLOW MAN

"I loved THE HOLLOW MAN—it is a genuine triumph, and I think only Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* can match its sadness and beauty."—Stephen King



"The major new talent to watch during the '90s."
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

A BANTAM HARDCOVER

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LOOKING GLASS

by Robert Frazier and James Patrick Kelly

Snow on the Greater Himalayas and Katmandu
like dendrites of frost
etching the windows on Christmas morning

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Today is my five hundred thirty-second day in space.
Spirits low.
No place to hide the presents.

Tinsel balls of brilliant silver
in the Canadian shield
the surfaces of glacial lakes connect

Weightless, careless, listless, joyless . . .
I miss you.
My breath fogs a window four hundred miles thick.

Curved sliver of pure jade
smear of blood
dawn over the Persian Gulf

Sorry you're frazzled, but I envy you everything,
even sleet,
fruit cake, the virtual santas and shopping for Aunt Bette.

Typhoon near Easter Island
the snowball gathering snow
and speed down a blue hill

Every day I float like an angel, high as Jesus.
Dream come true?
Tied to my bed, I lust for Earth's steadfast embrace.

A shimmering ribbon
on a ghostly package
Aurora Australis

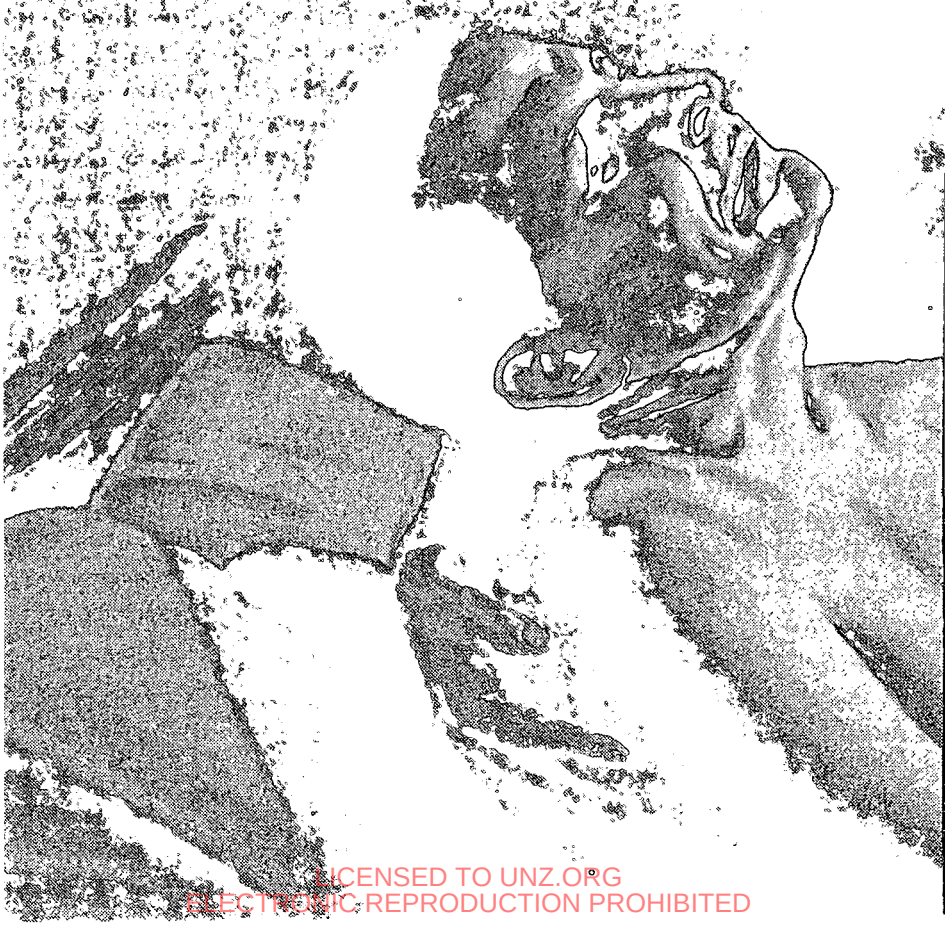
There's nothing here but what we brought.
Empty space.
Maybe I'm a shepherd's child, born to look up.

Laguna Verde, Namib Desert, Aral Sea
Macadam Plains, Rio Negro, Plateau du Djado
Antarctica, Kansas, glimpses of salvation

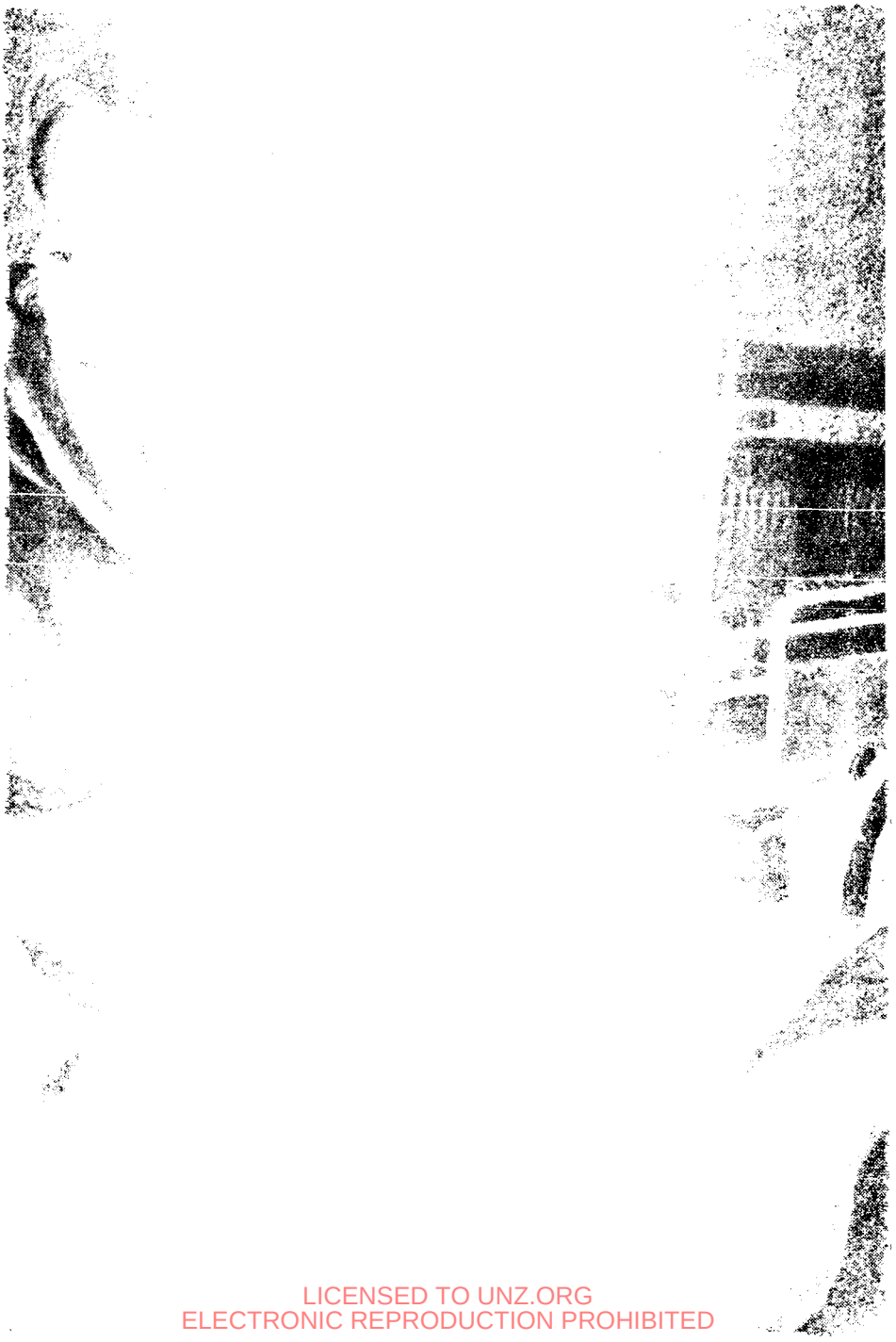
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Tom Purdom read Phillip Nolan's
History of the Indian Army
a few years ago, it occurred to him
that no one seemed to have ever done an invasion story
in which a small group of extraterrestrials
ruled Earth the way the British ruled India.
He thought such a novel approach to an alien-invasion tale
would have the advantage of putting
people like us into the same position
as the Indians who served the British.
These ideas led to the creation of "Sepoy."

art: Steve Cavallo



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There had been a time, near the end of the twentieth century, when very few people would have believed anything like the Tucfra Hegemony would ever be necessary. Then the global temperature had risen almost 50 percent faster than those unpleasant forecaster types had said it might, the tides had washed away beaches from the Riviera to the Great Barrier Reef, Londoners had discovered they couldn't get through an English May without an air conditioner, and it had seemed a little matter like the exact amount of fumes and radiation each city or province could dump into the atmosphere might be a *cause de guerre* after all. When the tucfra ship had orbited Earth in 2044, three small wars had already gone nuclear, the United States was lurching toward its second devolution, the Austro-Hungarian Economic Bloc was exchanging threatening faxes with the Russo-Turkish Defense Pact, and humanity had only been saved from a global plague, brought on by an attempt to use biological weapons, by a notably ruthless decision by the last prime minister of the Republic of India.

Intellectually, Jason Jardanel was willing to admit—in the privacy of his own thoughts, anyway—that the Hegemony had probably kept his fellow humans from wiping out every vestige of organized society on their planet. When he was confronted with the kind of suggestion he had just heard, however, he reacted like every upright, thoroughly conventional citizen of the New England Confederation was supposed to react.

"I'm a human," Jason told the woman lying beside him. "I'm not a tucfra. I'm not a seep. I'm a human."

The words hadn't come out that way, of course. She had caught Jason by surprise, while he had been languidly contemplating the ceiling of his bedroom, and he could still become almost unintelligible when a surge of emotion went racing through his psyche and he forgot to shape each syllable with extreme care. In the sentences Marcia Woodbine had actually heard, "human" had sounded more like *hammen*, "tucfra" like *tafre*, "not a seep" like *naughtahhsip*. Earlier Marcia had lifted Jason out of his wheelchair. Later she would cradle his skinny, flabby body in her arms and lift him out of bed.

He had thought she was just another one of those women who improved their opinions of themselves by dispensing sexual charity. They seemed to come along every year or two and he never turned them down if they were reasonably presentable. There had even been one or two he had liked.

"They thought you would feel that way," Marcia Woodbine said. "They told me I could tell you this was an offer that should stay open for some time. Your records apparently indicate you've got just the kind of intelligence they need the most—the ability to think very fast when you're confronted with practical problems."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jason stared at the ceiling. Twenty minutes ago, when he had opened his eyes between gasps, he had seen her, astride, towering above him, her breasts swinging from side to side, her face, with the close cut black hair, looking like it belonged on a Greek vase. There had been a young violinist in a North Pacific chamber orchestra, five years ago, who had looked like that. Jason had played a video of the chamber version of Sallinen's *Shadows* eight times just so he could look at her. He had never quite admitted to himself, at the time, that he had played it for that reason, but he had.

"They said I should also make it clear they would have to pick the body type they give you. It's apparently very important you look a certain way for the kind of jobs they have in mind."

It was a subtle approach, but Marcia couldn't quite pull it off. Jason could have picked up the tension in her voice if he had been listening to her through a concrete wall. *That's the offer we're making you*, Marcia was saying. *You can have a real body. You can walk around. You can pursue women. You just have to serve us. You just have to take the oath. To Us.*

"I'm also supposed to tell you some of the things they have in mind will be dangerous. They're not offering you a picnic."

"I think you had better go," Jason said.

This time every syllable he fabricated would have earned him a happy shout of praise from the speech therapy program he had worked with when he was five. The pace he was speaking at, on the other hand, would have given most people apoplexy. Jason had never walked along an icy street but he had long ago learned that strong feelings affected him the same way slippery walks affected pedestrians. He could only handle them by creeping along syllable by syllable.

"I . . . would . . . ap . . . pre . . . ci . . . ate . . . it . . . if . . . you . . . would . . . take . . . me . . . out . . . of . . . this . . . bed . . . and . . . go."

Two minutes after the door closed behind her, Jason was sitting in front of his desk with his wheelchair plugged into his information system. He had been working when Marcia had rung his bell and the work still had to be finished before the end of the day.

There were people Jason knew who would be happy to argue that he already had a functioning body. Some of the more radical techies would even have claimed the artificial physique he already possessed was bigger and more powerful than the best *merely organic* body the tucfra could grow in their medical centers. Every important item in Jason's apartment—the refrigerator, the cooking units, the doors, everything—was linked to a dual-input interface that would respond to two types of instructions: voice commands and signals from the control panel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

built into the right arm of his wheelchair. The personal service unit in his bedroom had even been outfitted with attachments that could handle most of his routine dressing and undressing. Jason spent 23 percent of his income on a personal service agency that sent two people around once a day, but he could sit here in his room alone, manipulating the devices that were linked to his computer, and do most of the things he needed to do without any help from anyone.

The speakers on his entertainment system could respond to the subtlest variations in bow pressure a violinist could transmit to the human ear. The entire ten by twelve wall on his left could be converted into a high resolution screen. His communications equipment connected him to a net that could provide him with companions and entertainments that could be located anywhere in the world. He had received so many calls from his friends last week that he had been forced to set up a privacy block just so he could have some time to himself.

What difference could a new body make?

The image on Jason's primary screen was the score of a string quartet by M.K. Sun, a composer who had written over a hundred and twenty quartets during the thirty years she had been an active producer. The first great Oriental composer to write in traditional Western forms, Sun had been a successor to the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean performers whose violins and cellos had been such a notable presence on the world's concert stages since the last decades of the twentieth century. Jason's employers, the Hartford Quartet, played a selection from Sun's output at almost every concert on their schedule. They relied on Jason to search Sun's catalog, analyze the available data on the audience they were going to be playing for, and come up with a selection that fitted the audience profile. For over six years now Jason had been planning the quartet's programs, making their travel arrangements, arranging alternate programs when one of them became sick, and even handling their fund raising.

"Scroll," Jason said. "Tempo—moderato 105. Execute."

The score scrolled across the screen at about the tempo Jason's four employers would probably play it. His brain turned the notes into a musical daydream that was probably a good approximation of the way they would interpret it. Sun was noted for the elegant surface polish of her compositions but that external sheen always covered a structure that was as complex as anything Bach had ever produced. She had, in effect, treated the string quartet as if it was a traditional Oriental art form such as haiku or Chinese brush painting.

A light glowed under a loudspeaker. The voice of his apartment building's security system superimposed itself on the music dancing in his head. "Jason Jardanel has a visitor. Name—William Patros, Department

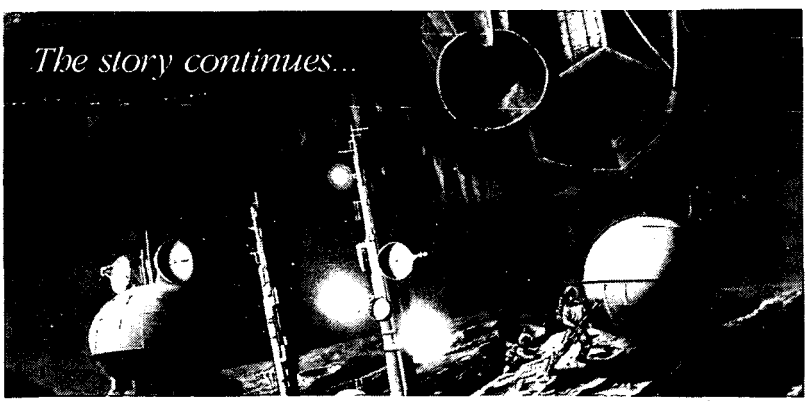
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The pod's instrument panel

measured his movement toward the Amnion warship

like a countdown to death. According to the screens, he now had

six more hours to live...to figure out who was being betrayed by whom.



STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

THE GAP INTO POWER

A DARK AND HUNGRY GOD ARISES

A powerful new novel of dark powers and dazzling technology by the bestselling author of The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant

Now available in paperback and on Bantam Audio Cassette:
FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE • *THE REAL STORY*
The Gap Into Vision *The Gap Into Conflict*

SPECTRA A BANTAM HARDCOVER

A Main Selection of the Science Fiction Book Club

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Internal Security. Message: I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, Mr. Jardanel, if it isn't inconvenient."

Patros had a round, youthful face and one of those medium-sized bodies that seem to have a lot of shoulder. His companion was named Jeanette O'Keefe and she was taller and older.

"We have some questions about the woman who just left here, Mr. Jardanel. Is there any chance she said something that indicates she may be employed by an organization that may be associated with the tucfra? We already have a number of indications that she is, but we'd naturally like to accumulate all the direct testimony we can put in our files."

Jason let his head slump to one side. His right hand rose off the arm of his chair and he let it wander around aimlessly for several seconds, as if he had started to make a gesture and lost control. There were times, Jason had long ago learned, when his condition had its uses.

"You think . . . Marcia . . . may be . . . a seep?"

"It would probably be more accurate to say we know she is."

"I'm afraid this was a . . . purely social . . . visit. I don't think she said anything at all about . . . poli . . . tics."

"Is this the first time she's visited you like this?"

Jason's mouth shaped itself into a twisted smile. "It's the first time she's been here alone."

"We have reason to think she sometimes makes people offers—that she often functions as a recruiter."

One of the software packages stored in Jason's electronic files was a counseling program designed for people with his "difficulties." He was well aware, thanks to the time he had spent with the program, that people with his condition had a natural tendency to be accommodating. When you were totally dependent on others, an abrasive personality was not a survival characteristic. Now, looking up at Patros's face, Jason had to fight the reflex that encouraged him to give his visitors whatever they wanted.

His mouth twisted into another smile. "I don't think she thought I was the right . . . physical type."

"What did she offer you?" Jeanette O'Keefe said. "A new body?"

O'Keefe had been leaning against the wall on which Jason had hung his little collection of antique instruments, with her head only half a nod from a twentieth century replica of a wooden Baroque flute. She slid into the conversation without making the slightest shift in her position.

"Marcia Woodbine came here . . . like many women . . . because she wanted to be . . . kind. There are . . . women . . . who seem to . . . respond . . . that way."

"And you're in the habit of accepting their kindness?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She is very . . . attractive."

"Recruiting for seeps is illegal in our Confederation, Mr. Jardanel. So is failure to report it."

It was a statement that was so obvious Jason might have smiled if he had heard anyone else throw it into a conversation. There was probably no political unit on Earth in which the word *seep* could arouse so much hostility.

In the nineteenth century, a few thousand British subjects had ruled millions of Indians by working through soldiers and civil servants recruited from among the Indians themselves. In the twenty-first century, a couple of thousand aliens managed eight billion human beings with the aid of several million human agents. In the Indian section of the British Empire, British officers had commanded regiments of Indian soldiers who had been called sepoys. In the world of the Tucfra Hegemony, the tucfra were the real power behind the UN "peace force," the UN civil service, and an army of "consultants," spies, and secret agents who had infiltrated every society on the globe. The New England Confederation had been forced to accept the presence of a tucfra embassy—but its flag was a globe guarded by a rattlesnake, and its laws and attitudes matched the sentiments expressed by the flag.

"We enjoyed a . . . purely social . . . afternoon. I'm afraid I can't help you with your . . . investigation."

"If she didn't offer you a new body yet," O'Keefe said, "she will. It's one of the major bribes they use to gain recruits. They've probably had their eye on you for years."

"I'm a human being. Ahm nawht . . . a . . . seep."

"A new body can be a very hard incentive to resist, Mr. Jardanel," Patros said.

"I've . . . become . . . fonder . . . of this one than you might think. It has its . . . defects . . . but it's mine."

It wasn't the best sally he had ever come up with, but Patros smiled anyway. "There are studies," Jason said, "of the way . . . people with disabilities . . . react to changes in their situation. It isn't . . . cut and dried. People have committed . . . suicide . . . after . . . beneficial . . . changes. Big changes involve . . . alterations . . . in your self-image . . . in your relations to others."

"The tucfra seem to have other ideas," O'Keefe said. "Whole body replacement technology is the one medical procedure they seem to be absolutely determined to keep out of our hands. Every human researcher who's ever tried to develop the technology has either been co-opted by them or side-tracked in some other way. It's the most important reward they have to offer collaborators, and they know it. The British imperialists used to keep the poorest people in their society living in the worst

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kind of poverty so they could recruit them into their armies. The tucfra spread viruses that turn people like you into cripples and then keep us from developing the only technology that will help you so they can offer a bribe very few people can bring themselves to refuse."

"I'm not . . . interested . . . in becoming a seep. I might like a new body but that doesn't mean I will do . . . anything . . . to get it."

O'Keefe pushed herself away from the wall. She closed the space between them with three long, easy-going strides. Jason raised his head and found himself looking up at a taut, angry face that looked just like all the indignant masks he had seen on a thousand news videos.

"We expect loyal citizens to cooperate with the authorities, Mr. Jardanel," O'Keefe said. "The people we are opposing have voluntarily terminated their membership in the human race. There is no reason why any *true* human should be unwilling to help us deal with them."

Jason had been eleven when his parents had made him stop watching the adventures of Captain Rhena Krishmikari and her side-kick, Lieutenant John White. Most boys that age had watched the other show and identified with Major Khan Singh and *his* side-kick, curvy Special Agent Dori Chang. Even then Jason had been the kind who would rather watch a woman when it came time for the lead to jump out of a helicopter or shoot it out with a South American dictator who was testing new bacteriological weapons in his underground torture chamber. He had already known that, for him, there was no point in *identifying* with anyone, male or female, who did things like that.

The first time his father had caught him, his parents had disconnected his TV control for two hours. The next time it had been disconnected for two days.

They had been even firmer, a year later, when he had searched the library for information on the controversy over his disease and discovered that the official position of the New England Confederation could be shattered by any kid with a keyboard who had the guts to ask the right questions. It had taken him less than ninety minutes to decide that the virus that had poisoned his major motor nerves had been developed by a human government, several years before the arrival of the tucfra, and spread by human carelessness. He had even located three different studies—by epidemiologists from three different countries—that proved that the virus had traveled from the Arabian desert to the regions that had the strongest commercial ties with the Saudi regime. He had spent five happy minutes savoring one more proof that adults were just as dumb as his thirteen-year-old ego had known they were—and then his mother had entered the room, and he had seen the terror in her eyes when she had realized he was looking at a map that showed the areas

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

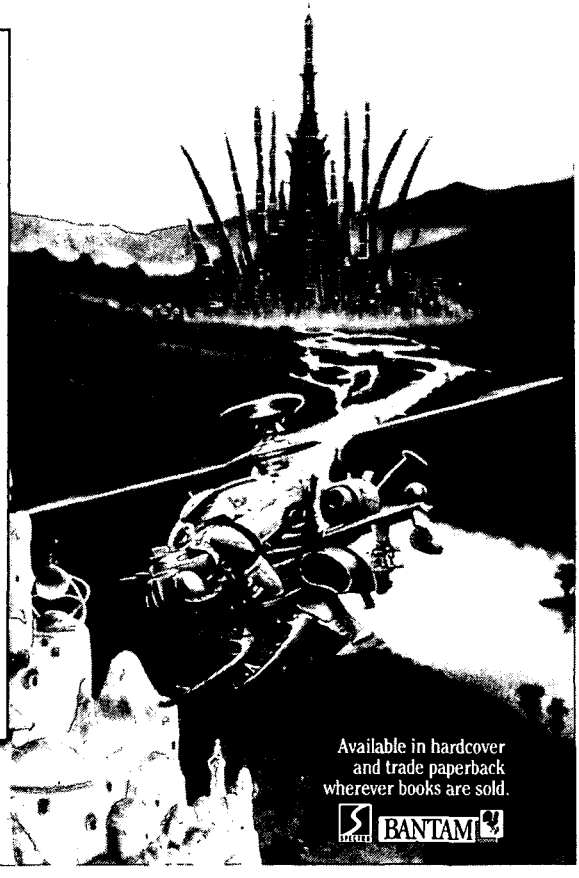
FROM THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
DESOLATION ROAD AND *KING OF MORNING, QUEEN OF DAY*

IAN McDONALD

"A master for a new generation of SF." –*Analog*
"A brilliant achievement." –*Locus*

THE BROKEN LAND

A stunning vision of violent conflict and healing love on an Earth of the far distant future.



Available in hardcover and trade paperback wherever books are sold.

BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with the highest incidence of the disease were Singapore and the metropolitan concentrations that surrounded Tokyo and Los Angeles.

There was no legal way the government of the New England Confederation could keep him from any information he really wanted. Legally, he could just phone the library and the database software would routinely transmit any video or written document anyone on Earth had filed in an information system. This was New England, after all—a republic which was carrying on the best traditions of the human race, as they had been embodied in the Constitution of the United States of America. And even if the library wouldn't cooperate with his request—how could you keep a kid from pressing the right buttons on his TV and picking up the stuff that came pouring down from the UN satellites?

The answer could be seen in the way Jason turned away from O'Keefe's face as she bent over him—and the way O'Keefe reached out, without any hesitation, confident he wouldn't object, and turned his head back toward her eyes. A republic didn't need censorship laws when it had private citizens who were willing to write S's on people's cheeks with well-directed lasers—or apply plastique and napalm to the homes of parents who didn't exercise proper supervision of their children. Jason's father had regularly "donated" 5 percent of his income to the COH—the Children of Humanity. He had even run little errands for the COH when he had to travel out of the Confederation on business. Jason's mother had understood, without anyone telling her in so many words, that the amateur chamber music groups she organized were only supposed to play music that had been written by composers who were "certifiably human."

At one point, O'Keefe went up to Jason's desk and removed the cartridge interface that translated his slurred vocalizations into signals his computer could react to. She stared at it thoughtfully, glanced across the room to make sure Jason had seen her, and then replaced it in its slot.

Jason hadn't looked at the clock when Patros and O'Keefe had entered his apartment, but he knew Marcia had left him a little after four. By five thirty, they had been harassing him for over an hour. There had been no blows and no overt threats, but what difference did that make? There were a thousand ways in which O'Keefe and her buddies in the COH could turn him into a helpless lump of misery. For the few seconds O'Keefe had been holding the interface cartridge in her hand, he had been totally isolated from most of the systems he would need in any emergency in which he couldn't use a keyboard.

"All we need is a single statement from you," Patros said. "If Woodbine didn't do it this time, then she'll do it sooner or later. We can't do anything legally without a statement from someone who's been approached. It doesn't matter if she did it just now or if she does it the next time you see her. All you have to do is give us a call."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You can even invite her back," O'Keefe said. "Nobody's going to object if you have a little fun first. We're a lot more understanding than people give us credit for."

Marcia had given him two numbers he could contact, with some mumbo-jumbo he could go through if he wanted to make it look like he was making an ordinary business call that had been encrypted for conventional business reasons. The call could go to Atlanta—to the hotel where the Hartford Quartet was currently staying—and from there it would go to a tucfra installation in the Carolina Federation which would relay it to its true destination. The encryption process was supposed to be some kind of gee-whiz development that the tucfra were "confident" the security agencies in the New England Confederation couldn't decode, Marcia had claimed. They would know he had made an encrypted call, but that would be it.

"Except, of course," Jason had said, "that they'll also know I just happened to call someone who has access to that kind of encryption software."

"It still won't give them any usable evidence. The Confederation courts tend to be strict about things like that. You've got a lot of fanatics in this area, but your courts tend to be just as fanatic about procedures."

He called the number that was supposed to put him in touch with Marcia herself, and she popped on the screen seconds after he had initiated the process. It only took her a moment to recover from her initial shock and get herself under control. She was sitting in her dining room having dinner with a friend, and she had to keep her thoughts to herself until she could step into another room.

"I'm sorry, Jason," she said when she had settled into her bedroom. "I wouldn't have said a word to you if I'd known that could happen. This is the first time I've ever gotten any indication they've been watching me."

"I wouldn't assume . . . O'Keefe . . . is going to worry about the . . . legal issues. She probably wants a statement from me so she can convince her . . . superiors . . . in the COH she isn't just . . . killing people . . . at random. Don't assume she'll leave you alone if she doesn't get it."

"My superiors will probably pull me out of this territory as soon as they think they can. The main thing we have to worry about is what happens to you. My personal recommendation is that you should go ahead and cooperate with them. Unless you're willing to take up my offer, of course."

"I called you to warn you."

"Then I suggest you cooperate with them. I can guarantee you all the tucfra I've ever met would give you the same advice."

"If I call . . . O'Keefe . . . and tell her you just tried to . . . recruit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me . . . it will be just like I gave her permission to . . . kill . . . you. I've seen how she looks, Marcia. I've . . . looked . . . at . . . her . . . face."

"You're under no obligation to protect me, Jason. I made a stupid mistake somewhere, and now it's up to me to look after myself. The longer you wait before you cooperate with them, the more it's going to look like you were giving me time to get away. You have to go on living here. You've already done more than anybody could expect of you just by making this call."

"Is that another example of the . . . moral principles . . . our lords and masters are supposed to be teaching us?"

"The tucfra have a civilization that is thousands of years older than ours. They've created a society that can live with weapons of mass destruction and all the other technical developments that nearly destroyed our *own* civilization. Their entire civilization is based on the idea that all the individuals in a technological society have to live by certain principles—and stand by them, even when it means they might be better off as individuals if they didn't. I put you in danger when I approached you. That means I'm expected to act like someone who has taken on certain obligations. They wouldn't want me to act any other way."

"And while you're getting yourself . . . killed . . . worrying about me, two thousand aliens are . . . gobbling up . . . fifteen percent of all the goods and services produced on earth."

"We're alive. We have a functioning world government. The global temperature has dropped almost a full degree. The imbalance in the distribution of wealth has been corrected to the point where half the people in the poorest country on Earth have the same standard of living as the population of Europe. We *might* have accomplished all that without them, but we've got several thousand years of history that indicate we wouldn't have."

He couldn't see her back, but he knew it was about as stiff and proud as a human spine could look. Her face was glowing with the kind of idealism you saw on the faces of the actors they used in the recruiting videos that the United Nations regiments sent down over the satellites.

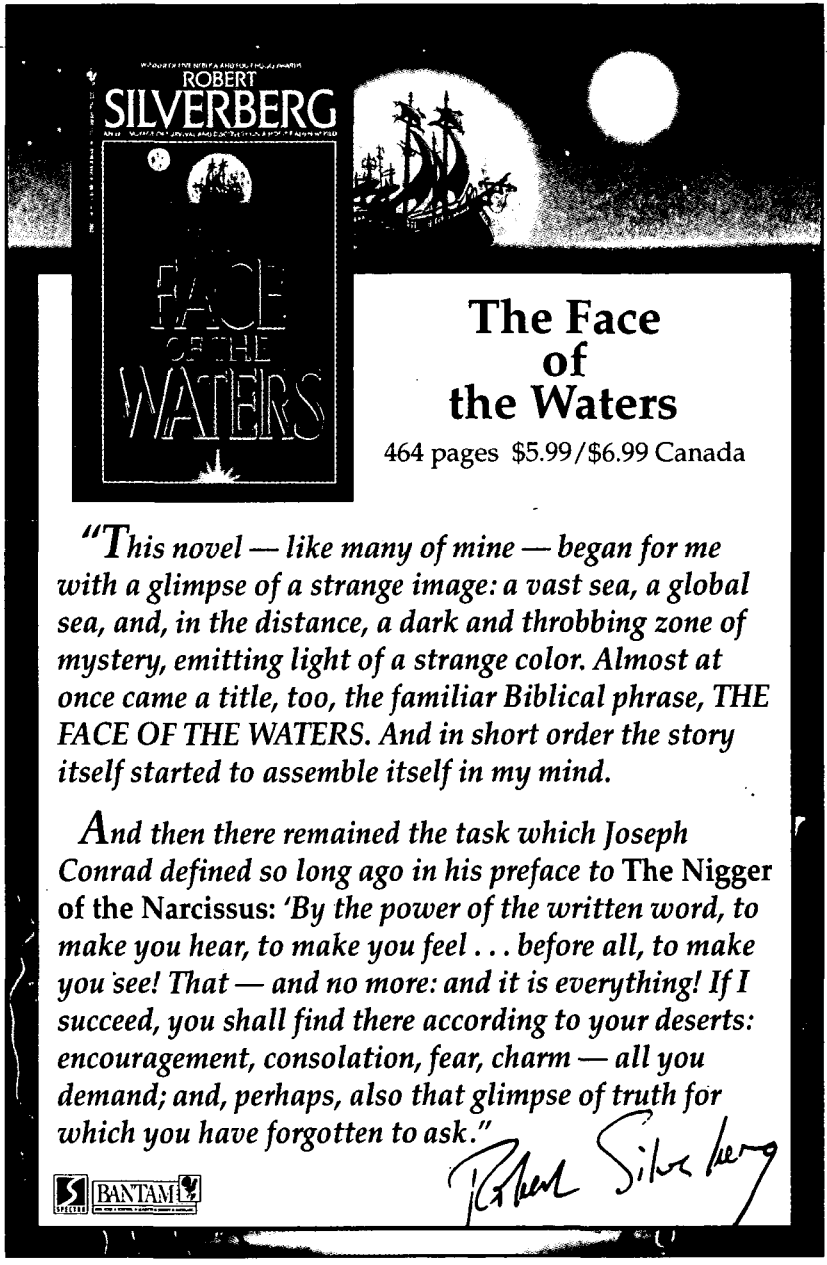
O'Keefe forced her way onto Jason's primary screen seconds after he broke the connection with Marcia.

"You made an encrypted call," O'Keefe said.

"It was a . . . business . . . call. I always . . . encrypt . . . business calls."

"With a type of encryption even the Department of Internal Security can't decrypt? You aren't being frank with us, Jason. You apparently have access to some exceptionally advanced encryption software. A loyal citizen should be eager to give his government the opportunity to put a product like that to good use."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



The Face of the Waters

464 pages $5.99/$6.99 Canada

"This novel — like many of mine — began for me with a glimpse of a strange image: a vast sea, a global sea, and, in the distance, a dark and throbbing zone of mystery, emitting light of a strange color. Almost at once came a title, too, the familiar Biblical phrase, THE FACE OF THE WATERS. And in short order the story itself started to assemble itself in my mind.

And then there remained the task which Joseph Conrad defined so long ago in his preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus: *'By the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel . . . before all, to make you see! That — and no more: and it is everything! If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand; and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."*

Robert Silverberg

SPECTRA BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It . . . was . . . a . . . private . . . business . . . call. There is no reason why any . . . government . . . agency should be . . . monitoring . . . my phone."

"The government agency can monitor your phone, Jason, on the grounds that you belong to a category that is very attractive to recruiters and have been seen with someone who is believed to *be* a recruiter—and you know as well as I do that the activities of the government agency in question are not your primary worry."

He called the second number Marcia had given him, and told the gatekeeper who answered the phone that he wanted to speak to one of the people who was *really* in charge. The gatekeeper spent a few seconds fussing over a computer screen, but apparently Marcia had filed all the relevant information. The trim figure that replaced the gatekeeper could have been the same tucfra officer that Captain Rhena had always chatted with when she had received the lowdown on the latest mission the video script writers had dreamed up for her. The tucfra generally preferred the bodies of athletic males in their late thirties or early forties when they chose to sample the pleasures available to beings who had been endowed with a human physiology. There were rumors that they sometimes entertained themselves by assuming the bodies of panthers or wolves when they were alone in their private domain in the Sahara, but there was no evidence that that was true. No one had ever seen a tucfra who didn't look like a debonair, totally relaxed human male in the prime of life.

"I've already examined Ms. Woodbine's reports," the tucfra said. "Please feel free to assume I've been fully informed about your present situation."

"I want to know—will she be . . . safe . . . if I co . . . operate with them?"

"I can only repeat what Ms. Woodbine has already told you, Mr. Jardanel. The best advice we can give you is to urge you to cooperate with your visitors at once—unless, of course, you're willing to accept our offer. I can assure you no one involved in this situation will engage in any action that will give our adversaries in your region the impression that you tried to give her time to escape."

"I'm asking about *her*. Will . . . she . . . be . . . safe?"

"We are giving her the best possible support someone in her situation can receive. I can't go into any more detail than that, obviously, but I think you know enough about us to know we don't abandon anyone who has given us their support."

"Can you . . . guarantee . . . she'll be safe? Can you . . . give me . . . your word?"

The tucfra smiled thinly. This was the first time Jason had ever actually talked to a tucfra, but they both knew he had probably read fifty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

essays and editorials on tucfra ethics and stared at his share of the two-minute ethical pep-talks the tucfra PR experts had scattered along the electronic byways. No species, the tucfra propagandists claimed, could survive the impact of high technology without a scrupulous sense of personal honor. There was no concept in tucfra ethics that was more critical. The army of lawyers that had infested the old United States had been a sure sign, according to this theory, that the old society could not handle the complexities created by technology. No one could write laws that could guide people through that level of complexity.

"There's no way in the world anyone can promise you that, Mr. Jardanel. That would be about the most dishonorable thing I could do, in fact. All I can tell you is that I know Ms. Woodbine well. I can assure you she's just as anxious to have you look out for yourself as I am. Your concern for her is exactly the type of reaction we are looking for in the people we would like to recruit. It would be a great loss if anything happened to you."

It had been three years since Jason had run the video of the North Pacific Chamber Orchestra playing Sallinen's *Shadows*. The young violinist sitting at the second desk didn't look as much like Marcia as his memories had indicated, but he could see how she and Marcia could activate the same areas of his psyche. The violinist was slimmer and younger than Marcia, with a spray of freckles over the bridge of her nose, but she had the same clean features, the same milky complexion, the same air of easy competence.

The speaker over his door emitted a genteel beep. An auxiliary screen lit up, and he found himself looking at Patros's face. "Would you mind if I come up, Mr. Jardanel? I'm afraid I have to trouble you again."

Jason glanced at his clock. It had been just about thirty minutes since he had left the appropriate message on the security agent's information system. His wording had been mildly ambiguous—*I'm just calling to tell you I've received the offer you were interested in*—but it should have given Patros all the support he needed for whatever he and O'Keefe were planning to do next.

"Dedya gamah . . . message?"

"I'm happy to say we did. And we appreciate it very much, too."

The elevator was equipped with a security camera that came on automatically whenever the elevator door slid open. The camera was mounted just below the ceiling, so Jason got a good view of the way the light played across O'Keefe's hair as she slipped into the elevator after Patros.

Marcia's face filled Jason's primary screen. On the auxiliary screen on the left, Jason could see the wide-angle view that displayed the carefully

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arranged tableau his own system was transmitting. He was slumped in his chair with his weight resting on his right side. O'Keefe was standing behind the chair with her left hand resting on his shoulder.

"There's a police office three blocks from here," Marcia said. "I can turn myself in there in ten minutes."

Jason closed his eyes and concentrated on the relaxation technique his speech therapy program had taught him. He formed the first carefully shaped syllable of the speech he had worked out in his head and O'Keefe reached around him as soon as she heard the strangled beginnings of a sound and covered his mouth with her left arm. She patted him on the cheek with her right hand, as if she was soothing a child, and Jason cringed when he saw the look on Marcia's face.

"We think it would be best if you came here," O'Keefe said. "This is a security matter, not a police matter."

"As I understand it," Marcia said, "you are not an official of the Department of Internal Security. I am perfectly willing to give myself up and stand trial. But I believe it would be best if I surrendered to an authorized police officer."

"Mr. Patros is a fully accredited official of the Confederation government. We are not here to negotiate with you. We want you here *now*. I'm certain Jason feels the same way."

O'Keefe's hand tightened on Jason's bony, undermuscled shoulder. Marcia stared out of the screen for a moment and then tipped back her head. Her face took on the same recruiting-video glow that Jason had seen before.

"At least we don't have to worry about whether or not she'll come," O'Keefe said. "That's one of the few advantages we have over these people. She wouldn't leave you here now if the tucs had an armored helicopter hovering over her apartment, ready to take her straight to whatever hole they've got waiting for her."

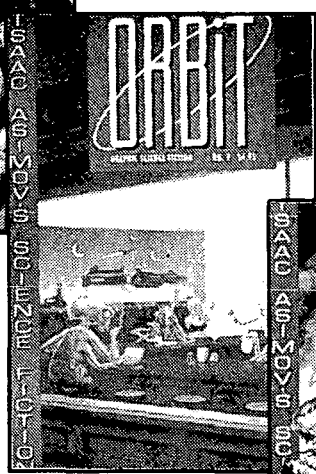
"And you use . . . that . . . against her?"

"She's an enemy of the human race, Jason. She doesn't have any more in common with you or me than a worm does."

O'Keefe and Patros had been carrying bulky equipment bags when they had entered the apartment. Now they had both slipped into armored tunics and lowered visored combat helmets over their heads. As every action-adventure enthusiast knew, the helmets were essentially an infantry version of the command and control technology that was routinely crammed into combat planes and armored vehicles. The technology packed into the helmets included components that could guide the wearer's aim, sensors that could maintain a 360 degree watch on their surroundings, offensive electronic devices that would attempt to disrupt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Special Offer For *Asimov's* Readers



ORBIT

VOLUMES 1 THROUGH 3, $4.95 EACH.

OR ORDER THE COMPLETE, THREE VOLUME SET FOR ONLY $9.95 (A 33% DISCOUNT!)

FIND THE BEST GRAPHIC SCIENCE FICTION IN ***ORBIT***, THE GRAPHIC ANTHOLOGY ***L.A. READER*** CALLED "...THE BEST—IF NOT THE ONLY—WAY TO VISUALIZE [SCIENCE FICTION]." TOP AUTHORS FEATURED INCLUDE ISAAC ASIMOV, BEN BOVA, FREDERIK POHL, LUCIUS SHEPARD, LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS, AND OTHERS... AND THE ARTISTS INCLUDE AWARD-WINNERS SUCH AS JOHN BOLTON, DAVE STEVENS, JOHN POUND, AND TOM YEATES. GET INTO ***ORBIT*** TODAY!

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____ ZIP_____

ORBIT #1 ❑ $4.95 ***ORBIT*** #2 ❑ $4.95 ***ORBIT*** #3 ❑ $4.95 ALL THREE ❑ $9.95

ADD $1.00 POSTAGE PER ORDER. SEND COUPON AND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER IN U.S. FUNDS TO **DEPT. IA122, ASIMOV/ORBIT, 380 LEXINGTON AVE., NEW YORK, NY, 10168-0035.**

NY RESIDENTS ADD 8.25% SALES TAX.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whatever command and control devices Marcia might manage to conceal on her person, and an expert system which could evaluate the situation and coordinate the efforts of a three-person combat team faster than any individual member of the team could think.

Patros saw Jason staring at the hardware and gave him a shrug. "You can't take too many precautions," Patros said. "A lot of these people have been enhanced. Our friends in the Sahara have ways they can enhance muscles and nervous systems even when they let their agents keep their original bodies."

"There's no such thing as a human seep," O'Keefe said. "They may *look* human, but it's just a façade. That wasn't a woman in your bed, Jason. It was a thing."

They had both shoved their hands into gloves and snapped leads to wires that connected the gloves with a junction hidden under their tunics. The tunics looked bulky and awkward compared to the stylish body armor Jason had seen in videos, but the video equipment had normally been worn by characters who represented organizations that could devote unlimited resources to glamorous weaponry.

"Jason Jardanel has a visitor," the security system said. "Name—Marcia Woodbine."

"Say the words, Jason," O'Keefe said. "We can always let her in with the keyboard."

"Admit . . . the . . . visitor."

The security cameras picked Marcia up as she entered the elevator and followed her down the hall toward Jason's door. The dressy black cape she was wearing had a swing and heft that made her look like a fashion model.

Something hard pressed against the side of Jason's neck. He pulled away from it, and O'Keefe shifted toward the front of his field of vision and let him see the bulky little weapon she was holding in her hands.

"Just sit still," O'Keefe said. "This is not the time to get fidgety, Jason."

Patros was standing on the other side of the room, where he would be located on Marcia's left side when she came through the door. Jason rolled his eyes in that direction and saw the security agent checking the electronics on a gun that had come off the same assembly line as the item O'Keefe had just brought to his attention.

Marcia had come to a stop two steps from the door. She waited without saying anything, and Jason realized O'Keefe and Patros were deliberately making her stand there.

Patros turned his head toward the microphone over the door. "We would appreciate it if you would take off your cape. Please do it in full view of the camera."

Marcia slipped her cape off her shoulders and let it fall onto the floor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

behind her. She was wearing the same kind of pants and pullover outfit she had been wearing the last time she had come here, but she looked stiffer and less bouncy.

"I'll take her," O'Keefe said. "Forget that. I'll take her."

Patros turned his visor toward her and then shrugged. "Just don't take too long. I wouldn't give her a second myself."

"She's a traitor. She should *know* that she's being executed."

It took Jason a moment to realize that he had been listening to two-thirds of a three-way conversation. The expert system in their helmets could talk to both of them though their earphones. It had apparently told them that Patros should shoot Marcia from the side—as she came through the door—and O'Keefe had overridden it.

The muzzle of O'Keefe's gun pressed against Jason's neck again. "Let's hear you say the words one more time, Jason. I'm certain your security system will be glad to receive some additional evidence you're a good citizen who cooperates with the people who defend his freedoms."

Patros had already settled into firing position, with the gun braced against his stomach and his left hand gripping the carrying handle. Now he turned his visor toward O'Keefe and stared at her again.

"I'm going to be making reports when this is over," O'Keefe said. "They're going to be asking me about you, Jason. Don't you think they'll want to know if you seemed truly cooperative?"

Patros shook his head. He crossed the room in three long strides, brushed his hand against the manual lock switch, and returned to his position.

"The door is unlocked," Patros said. "You can come in."

On the screen, Marcia pushed open the door from the other side. Jason turned his head away from the image and watched the real door swing into the room.

Marcia turned toward O'Keefe as soon as she stepped through the doorway. The red dot from the laser sight on Patros's gun pinpointed the spot on her chest where the bullet would go in.

"Turn it off," Patros said. "My electronics just beat your electronics."

O'Keefe still had her arm around Jason's head. The gun was digging into his neck as if she was trying to kill him by driving it through the side of his throat.

"It's off," Marcia said. "I turn it off by subvocalizing."

The pressure on Jason's neck let up. O'Keefe took her arm off his head and stepped away from the chair.

The noise didn't start until Marcia was halfway across the room and then it was nothing more than the phut, phut, phut of Patros's gun emitting a three-shot burst—a sound that was so subdued it was as unassertive as a polite cough. One moment Marcia had been looking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around her with bright, wide eyes dancing between Patros and O'Keefe. The next this intent, tight-faced demon was hurtling toward Jason with a red light glowing in her hand. Something dropped on the floor beside Jason's chair. O'Keefe choked out the first syllable of an obscenity.

The weapon Marcia had used was about the only effective piece of hardware she could have hidden in her clothing—a six inch cylinder that was sometimes called a laser "sword." It was usually used as a personal self-defense weapon and it had the great advantage that it could be carried like a pen or a pocket flashlight. It was called a sword because its pulse lasted a little over a second and people who didn't have time to develop their marksmanship skills frequently trailed it across their targets with a short slashing motion. Its great weakness was the fact that it had to recharge for several seconds after each pulse.

The keyboard on the arm of Jason's chair included a control panel for the chair itself. Marcia flowed past him with a velocity that was about twice as fast as the best speed any human should be able to force out of human muscles, and he rubbed his forefinger into the On square as if he was trying to scrape the plastic off.

His middle finger traced a path on the steering square. The chair shot forward with a force that made his head swing, but he managed to keep his hand on the control panel and chart a course that sent him charging toward Patros.

There was a long, strange moment when the muzzle of Patros's gun seemed to be pointed toward Jason's face. Then Patros moved to the right, to get a clear shot at Marcia, and Jason's finger drew a curve that kept the chair rolling straight at Patros's hands and the thing they were holding.

Patros's visor swung toward Jason. Patros jumped to the left, directed by the expert system in his helmet, and the chair rolled by him with the left wheel almost bruising his heels.

Patros had been standing directly in front of Jason's collection of instruments. The sensors on the chair activated the emergency speed controls but the bumpers still rammed into the wall with an impact that threw Jason's chest against the safety harness. A skinny Baroque oboe fell out of its clip and clattered across the floor.

Jason's hand overshot the control panel the first time he tried to get his fingers back into position. He tried to force it onto the panel by sheer will power and then gave up and brought the chair around with the slowest, most precisely articulated verbal commands he could squeeze out of his system.

O'Keefe was lying on the floor, with Marcia standing over her. A dark stain had spread across the entire left side of Marcia's pullover and the top third of her pants. On the floor just in front of the wheelchair, Patros

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STAR TREK® AUTOGRAPHED PLAQUES

Each limited edition photo plaque features an 8x10 color photo, personally autographed by your favorite Star Trek star!

- Deluxe wood plaque with black marble finish, ready to hang
- Each plaque is numbered, hand-signed, and limited to only 2,500
- Certificate of Authenticity, guaranteeing that the signature is genuine
- *Original Star Trek characters*, as well as Next Generation characters, available
- Perfect for bedroom, den or study
- Great gift idea for any Star Trek fan

Since each photo plaque is limited to only 2,500, a quick order is recommended. Credit card orders may call 609-354-9374 for immediate service. Or return the order form with your payment today!

ORDER FORM IASF 2

Original Star Trek

_____	Nimoy (Spock)	$149.95
_____	Shatner (Kirk)	$129.95
_____	Kelley (McCoy)	$119.95
_____	Doohan (Scotty)	$109.95
_____	Koenig (Chekov)	$109.95
_____	Nichols (Uhura)	$ 99.95
_____	Takei (Sulu)	$ 99.95

Next Generation

_____	Stewart (Picard)	$129.95
_____	Spiner (Data)	$ 99.95
_____	Dorn (Worf)	$ 99.95

Postage & Handling: Please add $8 for the first plaque ordered, and $2 for each additional plaque ordered.

Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. 30-day money back guarantee if not completely satisfied.

METHOD OF PAYMENT

_____ Check or Money Order enclosed for the total amount due.
(Make checks payable to Catch a Star Collectibles. NJ residents please add 6% sales tax.)

_____ Charge my: _____ MasterCard _____ Visa

Card# _____ Exp. Date _____

Signature _____

Phone _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

For Fastest Service on Credit Card Orders
Call 1-609-354-9374, M-F 9:00am-7:30pm
or Saturday 10:00am-4:00pm eastern time.

Send to: Catch A Star Collectibles
1951 Old Cuthbert Road
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034

STAR TREK®, STAR TREK®: THE NEXT GENERATION™ AND U.S.S. ENTERPRISE™ are trademarks of Paramount Pictures. ©1992 CSC

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was down on his knees, reaching across the tiles for his gun—which he had probably dropped, Jason assumed, when Marcia's laser had struck at his hand in the same way it had struck at O'Keefe's.

Jason's hand settled into position on the control panel. The chair shot forward. Another impact threw him into the safety harness. Patros lurched for the gun in spite of the disruption and Jason pushed forward again, as if he was driving a bulldozer into a pile of dirt.

Marcia strode across the room with O'Keefe's gun in her hands. She had set the selector on single shot, and there was something peculiarly businesslike about the brief little puff of sound.

Patros was doubled over with his visor pressed against the floor when Jason's brain finally started registering the things his eyes were picking up. Marcia had fired at point blank range, with the gun poised just above the point where Patros's neck joined his shoulder, and blood was still welling out of the hole and spreading across the security man's neck and the collar of his tunic.

"Do you think you're safe?" Marcia said. "Do you think they'll blame *you* for this?

"Is he . . . dead?"

"They're both dead. I broke her neck while she was down."

She had laid the gun on the floor so she could press both her hands against her side. Her enhancements obviously included components that could shut off pain and keep her functioning, but the soggy-looking stain was still oozing relentlessly across her clothes.

"Will O'Keefe's people believe I did this all by myself, Jason? Will they believe you if you claim you didn't help me? You'd better come with me if they won't."

She closed her eyes and hunched over her wound. There was a moment when Jason thought she was going to fall over. She turned away from him somehow, and he watched her stumble into the bathroom.

He heard her mumble something in a voice that was almost inaudible, the medicine cabinet gave her an answer, and he picked up enough words to know the cabinet was telling her how to treat her wound. The supply modules that were linked to the medicine cabinet covered 80 percent of the free wall space in his bathroom. The cabinet couldn't tell her how to remove the bullet or repair her mangled internal organs, but it could give her antibiotics, a self-sealing patch for the hole, and pain killers if her enhancements needed some help.

He backed the chair away from Patros's body and maneuvered himself into the middle of the room. There was a position that put him just forward of an imaginary line that connected O'Keefe's sprawling legs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with Patros's head. If he placed the angle of the chair just right, he could watch the bathroom door without seeing either of them.

Marcia was walking like a bent-over old woman when she eased herself out of the bathroom. She rested one hand on his desk and talked to him with her chin slumped against her chest.

"There's a car downstairs. They're supposed to have a hovercraft meet me at the beach. It may have to violate New England space by a few meters but I think they're willing to do that."

His brain was beginning to recover from the first shock. He was not, after all, someone who had a lot of illusions about the durability of the human body. No one had ever had to tell Jason Jardanel that the human body was a complex, highly vulnerable system which depended on the interactions of millions of highly vulnerable components.

"You can drive like . . . that?"

"I think I'm good for half an hour. It's up to you. Whatever you want."

Her eyes stayed on the floor. She was still hunched over but he could detect the same stiffness in her spine he had picked up when she had given him her big speech on the phone.

"You're not . . . going to go . . . until I tell you . . . it's all right. Is that it?"

"*Give me an answer, Jason! Please* give me an answer."

Her body slumped again. She turned her head away from him as if she was ashamed of the outburst.

"They would have killed you if I hadn't come here," she said. "They don't pretend about that. They would have killed you just so we'd know they meant it next time."

"So I . . . owe you . . . something?"

"You don't owe anyone anything. I'd just like an answer. So I can go."

"I don't . . . know . . . if they'll . . . believe . . . I didn't . . . help you."

"Then come."

"*You went after her first. I . . . understand . . . that. You didn't move* until she took . . . the gun . . . away from my neck. You wouldn't be . . . hurt . . . if you'd gone after him first."

"She would have killed you. I didn't come here to get you killed. That really *is* the way we operate, Jason. You may have to do the same thing yourself if you join us."

"You might not . . . reach the . . . rendezvous."

"I'll do my best to get you close enough so you can try to go the rest of the way in your chair."

"She liked . . . violence. They all like . . . violence."

"We'd spend our lives tearing each other's throats out if people like her had their way. If she wasn't fighting the tucfra, she'd be killing people over something else."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The tucfra only let us . . . kill . . . when it's . . . good . . . for us?"

"Would you rather let people like *O'Keefe* run things? Would you rather have us spend the next five hundred years fighting people like her over whatever little bits of civilization we didn't destroy with our mistakes?"

"I . . . couldn't . . . let them . . . kill . . . you. My father . . . my mother . . . they would have . . . killed . . . them, too."

"Please give me an answer, Jason. Please."

His fingers crawled across the control pad. The chair rolled forward and he turned it toward the door.

"Lean . . . on . . . the chair. Tell me . . . if I go . . . too fast."

"You're coming with me? You're joining us?"

"Do . . . I . . . have . . . any . . . choice?" ●

TERRAFORMING BYZANTIUM

We named it Byzantium, because it was no country
for old men.
Dome-bounded years passed, and the joke grew stale
but we wouldn't change it. (No one as stubborn
as a forty, feeling sixty hot behind.)

Now—have you noticed?—we are the old ones.
Our children press on, terraforming busily,
as bees build a hive. (They have never seen bees.)
Laboriously, they construct an outdoors,
assemble water, formulate fresh air.
(They have never walked outdoors, not really.
They have never tasted fresh air.)

We worked for a vision, to recreate a memory.
They work for survival, and for unborn offspring,
and because, what else is there to do?
(Do bees rejoice in golden hexagons?
Or do they only know work, and work some more?)

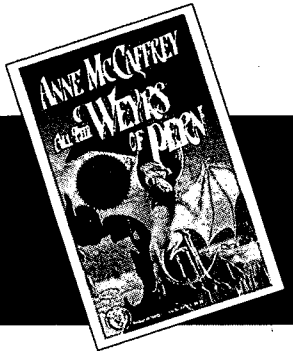
Our poor brave children! In the evenings,
as we sit and watch this sun go down,
blurring a little in beginnings of thin air,
we can close our eyes and hear them buzz.

—Bonita Kale

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

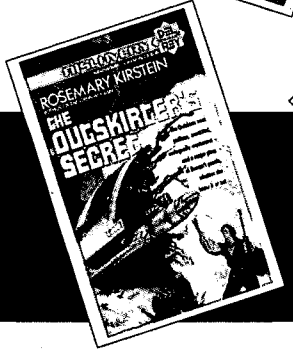
DECEMBER

THE DRAGONRIDERS' DREAM, THE WIZARDS' DREAD, AND THE STEERSWOMAN'S DISCOVERY—FROM THE FIRST NAME IN IMAGINATION.



The sequel to *The White Dragon*, a *New York Times* bestseller, *and* the book that all Pern fans have been anxiously awaiting!

The author of *Call of Madness* and *Mission of Magic* carries her spellbinding saga of besieged wizards towards its climax.



DEL DISCOVERY REY

This month's Del Rey Discovery! By the author of the acclaimed debut sf adventure, *The Steerswoman.*

#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy Published by Ballantine Books

DEL REY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Diane Mapes returns to our pages with a nasty little Christmas story about...

LICENSED TO UNL.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The mall was a madhouse.

Children squirmed and squalled in an endless line that snaked around a group of harried carolers and disappeared behind a huge spruce draped with lights, tinsel, and crumpled crayon drawings of elves. Shoppers elbowed each other as they skirted the line, their arms heavy with oversized plastic sacks and awkward rolls of wrapping paper.

Kris watched from the mall entrance as a woman screamed something at her daughter, then pulled out a tube of cellophane and batted her over the head with it. No time for second thoughts now. Drawing a deep breath, she shoved her way into the throng, aiming for the huge red throne on the candy-cane dais before the crowd.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" she bellowed in her best baritone, drowning out the saccharine sound of the piped-in carols, grinning at the bright hard eyes of mothers and the terrified gawks of children. "Merry Christmas everybody! Merrrrrry Christmas!"

"Santa's here!" someone shouted, and a familiar jingle bell rhythm began. "Look kids, it's Santa!"

A cheer went up as Kris stepped over a red velvet rope and plopped onto the throne. She let out her breath and looked around. To her left was a young scruffy guy with a Polaroid camera in one hand and a twist of silver bells in the other. He had tousled brown hair and a ruddy complexion, and his mustache and beard were either eight o'clock shadow or Don Johnson chic. In her college days, she would have found him attractive. At thirty-four, she was immune.

"Well hell-*o*, Santa," the man said. He spoke with exaggerated friendliness. He had an odd accent. British? Australian, maybe? "Snowstorm slowed you down some, I see."

Kris smiled and nodded, pretending to clean her glasses as she assessed the sea of faces before her. It seemed like there were thousands of them, all gaping at her like hungry birds. She could almost understand why Jeff had gotten drunk and pissed this last night of his Santa Claus stint away. Almost.

"We figured that old Rudolph's nose must have burned out," the man said in a loud garrulous voice. "But you're here *now*, so everything's all right after all. All ready to dole out those wishes, Santa Claus?"

Kris nodded, woodenly, and set her glasses onto her nose. The man leaned closer; his smile was as stiff and pasty as the glue that held her whiskers together.

"I said, 'All *ready*, Santa Claus!' " His brown eyes prompted her, and Kris swallowed with a dry throat. Time for her performance.

"All ready, young fellow?" she rumbled, trying to clandestinely pat the pillows inside her suit into place. Her car keys jingled as she hit her purse; she'd stuffed it in there, too. "Time for Santa to say hello to *all*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these good little girls and boys!" Kris looked over at the photographer questioningly—her voice sounded as false as Jeff's promises not to drink—but he gave her an encouraging nod.

"Come on *up* here, young man," she said to the first boy in line. "Come on up and tell Santa what you want for Christmas!"

The boy shyly approached and Kris lifted him onto her lap.

"Now tell Santa your name, kid," said the photographer.

"His name's Randy," a fat woman in a black coat said. "His name's Randy, and *my* name's Gloria, and if you don't take that damn picture pretty *soon*, mister, *your* name's gonna be mud. I been waiting in this line two damn hours!"

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" Kris said, patting the little boy on the leg. "Your mom told a good one!"

Randy looked up at her, his eyes narrowing. "What's the matter with your *voice*, Santa?"

It didn't get much better after that. The children either shrieked in her face, asked her pointed questions about her voice, or smeared candy canes on her silky white beard. The questions and the screams she could ignore—she'd had Marissa enough years for that—but the candy canes were what got to her. They were messy, always breaking into sharp little pieces. Candy canes and marriages were a lot alike.

After twenty minutes, she'd seen more white tights, patent leather shoes, red plaid bowties, and tonsils than she'd ever wanted to see in her entire life, but the thought of Jeff's paycheck kept her on her velvet throne. Eight hundred dollars. With $800, she could pay the fuel bill, the phone bill, buy herself some winter shoes to replace the ones Jeff had thrown out the car window during their last fight. With $800 in her pocket, she could even afford to buy some presents, so that Christmas wouldn't be quite so bleak, even with Jeff still unemployed.

"Okay, who's *next*?" the photographer asked, rubbing his hands together like a satisfied troll. "Who's next to see Santa Claus?"

He *likes* this job, Kris realized suddenly. He *believes* in this crap—all that gooey sentiment they fed you at church and on the Peanuts Christmas special. He's one of those Peace-On-Earth types. He probably trick-or-treats for UNICEF.

The photographer dumped another kid on her lap, and paused long enough to look up at her. "Silver bells, Kris. Hear them? Hear them ringing? They're ringing for *you*."

He bounded back down to his camera, and her gaze returned to the crowd: to a little boy clutching a dirty stuffed animal, to a pair of teen-age girls leaning against a candy cane pole, giggling. They were watching the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

photographer—what did he mean by silver bells? —then one of them flicked her eyes over to Kris. They widened suddenly.

"Santa Claus is a fag! Santa Claus is a fag!" the girls started to chant. A few mothers bundled up their babies and quickly huffed away. The photographer started passing out candy canes like a politician's promises come election time.

Must not have gotten all the make-up off, Kris cursed, rubbing at her eyes. She looked up to see a hawkish woman in a severe gray suit gingerly step over the red velvet rope in front of her. She didn't need to read the courtesy nametag to know who it was.

"A problem, Mr. Bradley?" Mrs. Spencer, the mall manager, asked, watching with an auditor's eye as the photographer doled out candy canes. "It would appear that there were some dissatisfied parents just now." Her fingers rapped against the side of a candy cane pole as if it were her ten-key back at the office. Her eyes lit on Kris. "Well, I see that Mr. Proctor—I mean, Mr. *Claus*—has finally arrived."

Kris nodded and started to say something.

"Everything's fine," the photographer cut in. "Those women were just offended at some of the language the girls used. Nothing to worry about."

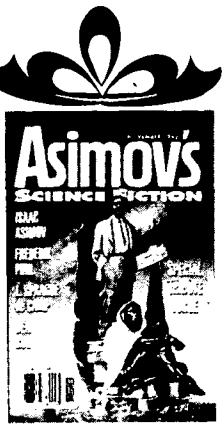
"Very good," Mrs. Spencer said. "Because I don't intend to worry about any part of this operation. I expect this operation to run as smooth as glass. Do you understand me, Mr. Bradley? Smooth as glass." Bradley grinned and nodded, fiddling with his camera. Mrs. Spencer leaned forward and spoke to Kris, her breath sterile with disinfectant. "Just remember . . . *Santa*," she whispered, "I'd better not hear a single complaint about how you're operating things down here at Candy Cane Lane, or the whole deal will be *off*, just as I told you on the telephone. There will be no payment as per the stipulations in the contract. *No* payment. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, indeedy, Mrs. Spencer," Kris chuckled, trying to keep her voice low. Her eyes closed as she thought of the eight hundred dollars she needed so badly. She could *see* it, all wrapped up in a white money bag with wings, flying away out the window, like in those old-timey cartoons Marissa hated to watch. "And a merry Christmas to *you* and all the little Spencers, too! Merry Christmas *everybody*! Ho! Ho! *Ho*!"

"How many *more*?" Kris whispered, looking at her watch. Her throat felt bloody, her legs were bruised and stiff, and she had to piss like a reindeer. When she got home that night, she was going to *kill* Jeff. *If* she ever got home. She had an hour and a half to go until the mall closed. And she still hadn't finished *her* Christmas shopping, or any of the other errands she'd planned to do tonight.

"Twenty-five or so," Bradley said, crouching beside her. "The kids are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



WRAP UP YOUR HOLIDAY GIFT GIVING

This holiday season give a subscription to **Asimov's Science Fiction.** It's the perfect gift and it will be appreciated through out the year.

Once-a-year holiday rates are now in effect. Your first gift subscription costs only $22.95 for 15 issues. Each additional gift subscription is even less--just $18.95 for 15 issues.

Analog Science Fiction & Fact Magazine is also available at these low holiday rates. The first subscription costs only $22.95 for 15 issues, each additional subscription costs only $18.95 for 15 issues.

Giving a gift subscription is easy. Just fill out the form below or if you prefer, call **TOLL FREE 1-800-333-4108.**

Mail To: Asimov's Science Fiction
P.O. Box 7058
Red Oak, IA 51591

- ❑ Payment enclosed.
- ❑ Bill me.
- ❑ Please, renew my own subscription.

Gift to: _____ Bill to: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

❑ Analog ❑ Asimov YMWA-6

Gift recipients will begin their subscription in January, with the current issue.

We publish two double issues, in April and November.
Each double issue counts as two towards your subscription.
Foreign orders please add $6.00, (cash with order US funds).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

getting tired, and the mothers need to pick up that last pair of slightly irregular Isotoners before they're all sold out." He looked up at Kris, and smiled. Even teeth, she noted. A lot more even than the goopy Christmas drivel he'd kept coming up with all night. Except she was starting to wonder about that, too. There was an edge to Bradley, a secrecy; he reminded her of a cat that feigned sleep whenever a bird was around.

"I can't take much more of this," she said, reaching for the can of Coke that Bradley had slipped her an hour before. It was warm, and burned her mouth like liquid sandpaper, but she drank it down gratefully. That would have made a great commercial, wouldn't it? she thought, crackling the can in her fist. Red and white can, red and white Santa. Red and white, she mused. The checks she'd written the past week as they'd appear on the bank statement next month. Jeff's face, bloodied and bashed in the snow. She gazed over at the photographer's bowed head. Red and white. Bradley's ruddy skin next to her own . . . *touching* her . . .

"I need a break," she said. "I'm starting to see sugar plums."

"Come on, love," Bradley said, patting her knee. Her skin tingled at his touch. Dumb bitch, she thought. Quit acting like a schoolgirl. "You're doing a lot better than that lush they've had in here for the last month." He smiled at her again; there was a trace of impishness to it.

"That lush is my *husband*," she said, standing up and stamping her feet. Her toes tingled inside the big black boots. Her skin was starting to itch from the red suit.

"Okay, everyone!" Bradley said, bounding off the dais. "Santa's going to take a little break now. Got to go out back and check on his reindeer."

Some of the parents complained, some looked relieved; a few wandered off, towing their children behind them like garbage bags being dragged to the curb. Kris walked down the steps and stood next to Bradley. There was a certain *smell* about him, not at all unpleasant, not really like aftershave, almost like incense, the strong kind Jeff used to burn to cover up the smell of pot. It had teased her all night long. Darkroom chemicals?

"I won't be long," she said, stepping over the red velvet rope.

"Oh, I'll be fine, Kris," he said, grinning. "There's plenty of poor souls out there to keep *this* elf busy!"

The sound of Bradley's laughter followed her down the hall, as light and silvery as the jingling of her keys inside the red velvet suit. Kris tried to concentate on keeping her bladder from bursting, but the fact that he had used her name again niggled at her. Had she told him what it was? Or was it just the suit she was wearing?

She paused at the Starlite Lounge, peering in out of habit. A few regulars sat hunched on their barstools, knobby hands wrapped around their drinks. Nat King Cole crooned carols in the background. A lone cocktail waitress in a Santa hat leaned against the side of a booth near

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the door, talking to two college guys. Kris passed the bar, then ducked into the sterile hallway and hurried toward the bathroom. It was all the way to the end, just past the Crossroads Mall office.

"Thank god!" she said as she heard a toilet flush and the air dryer begin to drone. It was the first relief she'd felt all night. Just as her palms hit the wooden door, though, there was a clatter of high heels behind her.

"Just what do you think *you're* doing?" Mrs. Spencer screeched. "That's the *ladies'* room, Santa Claus!"

"I thought I'd find you here."

Kris looked up from her third beer, her vision just starting to blur at the edges. A man stood beside her: scruffy beard, dark hair, darker eyes that laughed at her and made her feel young and restless again. It was that Australian photographer. Bradley.

"Two more beers," she called to the cocktail waitress. She was enjoying her drunk, wanted it to last. It had been a long time in coming.

"My treat," she said as Bradley mounted the stool beside her, his camera bag plopping to the floor beside him. She grabbed her wallet from underneath the spill of beard on the bar and tugged out her last few bills. "You helped me out back there with that bitch. Mrs. Spencer. Hell of a lot of *good* it did, but you tried, and I appreciate it." She scowled and sipped at her beer again. She'd been to the bathroom twice since her run-in with the mall manager—when was it, half an hour ago? An hour? Two?—and nobody here had tried to stop her. In fact, they'd all treated her damn friendly here. This was a good place, a wonderful place; she wondered why she hadn't visited it before. She blinked and looked over at Bradley. He was thumbing through her wallet.

"So where are your wedding photos?" he said. "Or your honeymoon photos? All you've got here is a picture of a cat."

"Cat's the only one I care about," Kris said.

Bradley laughed. Jingling bells. Did he still have them with him? "Things that bad, are they, love?"

"Worse," Kris said. "The cat's dead." Bradley laughed again, and Kris opened her compact and stared at herself in the mirror. She looked like a fool, still dressed in the stupid Santa suit, red felt hat shoved down over her hair. Damned if she was going to give it *back* though, not until she got her eight hundred dollars.

She realized the photographer had said something about a daughter. *Sure*, she had a daughter.

"Marissa," she said. Her little angel.

"Marissa." Bradley rolled the neck of the beer bottle back and forth in his palms like it was a piece of Playdough. "Nice name."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah, nice *name*," Kris said. "*Used* to be a nice *kid*, too, until . . ."

"Until?" he prompted her.

Kris shrugged. "I don't know," she said.

"So, how old is this Marissa?" Bradley raised the bottle to his mouth, then hesitated, his lips brushing against the glass as he watched her. His eyes were deep brown, and there were crow's feet at the corners of them. He wasn't as young as she'd first thought, Kris realized. He could be her age, maybe older. Maybe even as old as the creased leather jacket he wore.

She pulled off the Santa hat and smoothed the hair out of her eyes. "Seven," she said, running a thumbnail down the length of the beer label. It left an ugly tear in its wake, like the scratch her cat, Spook, had left on her arm when she tried to save its kittens from being flushed down the toilet. By Marissa, her little angel. "Seven going on forty-five. Kind of like her father, except with *him*, it's the other way around."

Bradley kept staring at her, quiet. Kris turned from his gaze, playing with her compact, shredding her cocktail napkin, turning to watch the waitress bring vodka tonics to the two old women in the booth to her right, anything to get out from under the power of those eyes. Finally, she turned back.

"How come you keep *looking* at me like that?" It was too hot in here, too damn hot. The fire behind him and the stupid red suit. Even if she was holding it for ransom, she'd have to take it off soon, or she'd suffocate.

"Like what?" Bradley took a sip of beer, his eyes finally flickering away.

"Like you think something is funny or something," Kris said. She couldn't exactly put into words the feeling he gave her. It was like he was hungry and she was a slab of prime roast beef . . . but not quite. More like he could see her naked, even through two layers of clothing. Or like he *knew* something about her, her worst, her darkest secret, but still *liked* her in spite of it. Maybe even liked her *because* of it. It was unsettling.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess I'm just curious."

"About me?"

"Yes. Why are you here, Kris? What do you want?"

Kris stared down at the bar, into her murky dark reflection. "Me? I wanta win the lottery. I wanta go dancing, I wanta lay on the couch and watch the Big Money Movie." The waitress settled two more bottles in front of her. They made a pleasant clink, like silver bells. Her bells. She heard them ringing now. "What do I *want*? I want to get drunk and flirt with a strange man from Down Under, that's what I want."

"So you've guessed where I'm from," Bradley said. Kris relaxed a little. Time to talk about somebody *else's* life; she was sick of *hers*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Your accent gave you away," she said. "You're a long way from home."

"True," he said. "Business always takes me away from home."

"Helping Old St. Nick out at Christmas? That your business?"

Bradley took a long pull from his beer. "Helping Old Nick out is my primary duty. But I freelance a little as well."

Kris nodded. Freelance. Just like Jeff. Two weeks here, a month there. She watched the flames licking at the logs behind Bradley. They were beatuiful, wild, as hypnotic and searing as his gaze. He looked up at her, and the flames jumped.

"Sounds like you've been under a lot of pressure for a long time, Kris. Kind of preys on a person's soul after a while, don't you think?"

"How the hell would you know about my soul?" She poured the rest of the beer into her glass and shoved the empty at the waitress. "How the hell would you know *anything* about my life?"

"I know you," he said.

Kris took another drink; the beer turned sour in her mouth.

"Jeff. That bastard never *could* keep his mouth shut," she said. "So what did Jeff say about me? That I'm always nagging at him about his drinking? That I'm just a money-grubbing bitch?"

"Jeff didn't tell me anything about you."

"I'll bet. Well, I'll tell *you* something. I'm not the bitch he makes me out to be. I do a lot for him. I do a lot for *everybody*."

Bradley laughed, a low silver chuckle, and seemed to move closer, even though his body hadn't shifted from the stool. Kris felt strange, light-headed, as if the two of them were encased in a metallic bubble, like one of the waitress's Christmas ball earrings, sectioned off from the rest of the room, from the rest of the world. She tried to focus on the white fur hats of the old women to her right, but all she saw was the reflection of the fire against the deep wood of the bar. She couldn't hear Nat King Cole anymore, or the murmur of cocktail-lounge conversation. All she could hear was the crackling of the fire, and Bradley's voice.

"That's the trouble with you," he said. "You think the world's going to fall apart if you're not there to hold it together. Well, you're wrong. If you were to die right now, things would still get done. Jeff would still limp along from job to job. Mr. Tomkins would get somebody else to type up his Environmental Impact Statements. Cookies would still get made, presents would get bought and wrapped. Christmas would come and go, just like always."

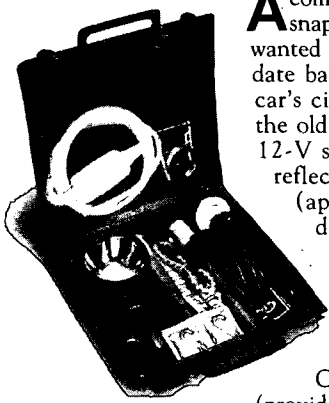
"But it wouldn't be the same," she said belligerently. "Things wouldn't be done *right*." When had she mentioned Mr. Tomkins? She couldn't remember.

"Maybe, maybe not. But what do *you* care, you've just died. Remember?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ORDER MALL

FOR ROADSIDE PROBLEMS



A compact carrying case of polyethylene with snap lock comes complete with the most-wanted emergency aids. It includes, an up-to-date battery charger that plugs into another car's cigarette lighter-easier and safer than the old jump start cables. There's a powerful 12-V spotlight with lighter plug and red reflector, plus two 15-minute safety flares (approved in 50 states)-plus a 24" sq. distress flag. Also a tank-to-tank gas siphon pump, a 6-qt. bag for carrying water, a roll of plastic tape for emergency repair of hoses and wiring, a coil of wire and 4 elastic trunk tie-downs complete the kit. Clean up with a moist towelette (provided) and you're on your way 11 3/4" sq.
$24.98 (S5.50)#A1826X

NIGHT TRACKER

Light up your night! Night Tracker, the cordless, rechargeable hand-held spotlight packs a 500,000 candlepower beam to give you light whenever, wherever you need it. The beam is 10 times brighter than your automobile headlights and will carry over 1 mile. Operates on rechargeable batteries. Recharge it from 110 volt AC outlet or from any 12 volt car or boat outlet. Perfect for home, travel, boating and camping. Made in the USA and comes with a 90 day warranty. Now includes an amber and red lens attachments.
$79.98 (S6.50) #A1975

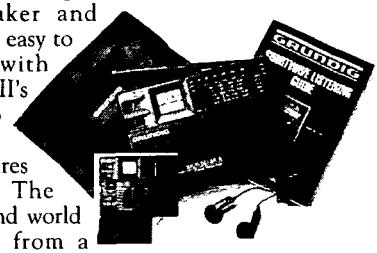
To order by mail send check or credit card number and expiration date **to: MAIL ORDER MALL,**
CALL TOLL FREE 24 HOURS A DAY **1-800-722-9999** **Dept.** 122 IA
MASTERCARD/VISA AMERICAN EXPRESS **PO Box 3006,**
30 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE•For Exchange or Refund **Lakewood, NJ 08701**
For each item add shipping and handling charge shown ( ) to arrive at total price. NJ residents add 7% sales tax.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ORDER MALL

TUNE IN WITH TRAVELLER II

People on the go need to have the world at their fingertips and with the Traveller II by Grundig you can tune in to a world of information and entertainment—wherever you are. This sleek innovative radio offers you a choice of 5 shortwave frequencies plus FM and AM reception with a sophisticated 2 inch speaker and telescopic antenna. It features an easy to read multifunction display with precision tuning. The Traveller II's alarm lets you choose the radio alarm or the gentle Humane Wake System (HMS) which features a gradual increase in volume. The display clock offers home time and world time that is easily selected from a concealed world time select switch. Only the innovative electronic technology of Grundig could offer you all this in an incredibly compact unit (5 1/2" x 3 1/2" x 1 1/4"). Comes with plug in earphones for private listening and a sleek black carrying case. Requires 3 AA (batteries included) and offers one year warranty. So wherever your travels take you —the Traveller II is the portable shortwave world time radio that makes the perfect travel companion. $99.00 (S8.50) #A2023



FAN-TASTIC

All fans circulate air, but this is the only fan that circulates air in all directions at once. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling. As the fan operates a unique rotating grill directs the air flow through a 360° sweep, so it is not blasting out in a single current. Pushbutton controls turn grill rotation on/off, select among three fan speeds. This is a year-round fan, ideal for keeping heat off the ceiling in winter, moving cool air off the floor in summer. Measures 16"x18 1/2"x7" slim (12" fan diameter), weighs only 8 lbs. for easy portability. Quiet operation, UL listed, one year limited warranty, costs only $49.98 (S7.95) #A1868

To order by mail send check or credit card number and expiration date **to: MAIL ORDER MALL,**
CALL TOLL FREE 24 HOURS A DAY **1-800-722-9999** **Dept.** 122 IA
MASTERCARD/VISA AMERICAN EXPRESS **PO Box 3006,**
30 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE•For Exchange or Refund **Lakewood, NJ 08701**
For each item add shipping and handling charge shown ( ) to arrive at total price. NJ residents add 7% sales tax.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She pinched her hand; it left a little red mark. "I don't *feel* dead." All she felt was dizzy. And hot, from the suit, the fire, from Bradley and from his twisting silver loops of words. She was drunk. *So what?* a voice in her head whispered. *The beer's cold, have another sip.* She did. The dizziness cleared, became something else. A cloud, hot and seductive as the fire in Bradley's eyes. Why had she thought they were brown? They were black and smoldery, like coals.

"You're right," he said. "You're far from dead. You've just never been born. How about *that*?"

"I *wish*," she said, snorting. "That would make things a lot easier. No husband, no daughter. No power company shutting me off if I don't pay up their lousy $124.60."

She sighed, feeling the warm pleasant pressure of his thigh against her own. "If only it *was* that easy."

"Maybe it *is*. Maybe all you have to have is a little faith."

"I had a little faith, but I lost it. Right after my parents got spread all over the freeway one night. God, that's another thing I was gonna do tonight. Their wreaths."

"What do you care about wreaths, Kris? You're of a different world now."

Kris stared at the beads of moisture on the bar, broke one open with her fingertip, wiped it down to nothing. "Come on, Bradley," she said, wearily. "It's a great barroom fantasy, but that's all it is, and we both know it. I'll go home, and Jeff'll be mad at me for being gone so long, Marissa will have a screaming fit 'cause I made her stay with a woman who forced her to eat spaghetti with olives, and tomorrow, when I go into work, all I'll have to show for tonight's little flirtation is a bad headache." She looked up, gave him a half-smile. "It's been great fun pretending, but miracles like that just don't happen these days."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Kris. This is Christmas, the time for miracles. That's why you're dressed in that suit, remember?"

"I'm dressed in this suit because Mrs. Spencer won't fork over the $800 she owes me and Jeff. Although at *this* point, I'm about ready to give it all up. It must be 150 degrees in here." She pulled out the front of her red jacket and blew down her chest. Bradley leaned over and blew with her. His breath was warm against her throat, warm as fire, and for a moment she pictured him as a dragon, breathing flame, a barbed tail flicking behind him. Then the image was gone.

He stood and slung his camera bag over his shoulder, and suddenly they were outside of the metallic Christmas-ball bubble, and back inside the Starlite Lounge again. Kris blinked her eyes, trying to focus on the glass in front of her. It wavered pleasantly.

"Come on," Bradley said behind her. "Let's get out of here and give

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you a chance to cool off. Don't worry about the beers, I'll pay for this round."

"I've got money," Kris said, fumbling for her wallet. But her wallet was empty. No money, no license, no lottery tickets. Not even the picture of Spook.

"Hey, where's all my money?" she asked him. "And my *picture*. And my tick—"

"I've been trying to tell you, Kris," he said, steering her away from the bar. "But you don't seem to want to listen. Santa doesn't have a monopoly on Christmas wishes, you know. *I've* got some pull, too. You've *got* your wish. You've not been born."

And then they were outside. Outside in the snow. But she wasn't burning up anymore, she felt just right, despite the fat wet flakes in her hair and the plume of cold breath wreathing her head and the gray white slush permeating the toes of her leather-look sandals.

Sandals? Kris looked down, and saw that she was out of the Santa Claus suit, wearing the same skirt and sweater she'd had on when she first got the call from Mrs. Spencer. She wondered if it had all been a dream and she'd somehow sleepwalked her way down to the mall—conjuring up the Santa scene out of guilt, and Bradley out of a suppressed libido—but then he was walking toward her, a tall dark figure emerging out of the light like a shadow with a halo of fire, and then he was beside her, wrapping his arm around her and smiling at her like the cat that ate the canary, and whether it was dream or reality, Kris didn't much care. She felt warm and good, like she did when she was a little girl, waking up from a bad dream to her mother's soothing words.

"You look a little more awake now," he said, leading her away from the parking lot light toward the busy intersection out front.

"I feel pretty good," Kris said. "But what are we doing out here?"

"Don't you remember?" he asked her playfully, his fingers brushing her face. Kris tried to concentrate. Vague images came at her, as ephemeral as the snowflakes they were walking into, each melting away under the heat of her scrutiny. They'd been talking in the bar. Debating something. Her birthday? When was her birthday? She couldn't remember.

Bradley pulled her toward the road. "Never mind, love. It's not important. Just come along. I want to show you something."

Kris remembered now. They'd been talking about crazy stuff, about her not being born. Drunken fancies, that's all they were. That's all it *ever* was. Miracles didn't happen, not to her. She looked around the parking lot for her car.

"Look, Bradley," she said, planting her feet. Snow covered her sandals and she glanced down at them, confused because there was no cold. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had fun tonight, but it's late now. And the later it gets, the better chance there is that Jeff'll be home cutting up my clothes with the pinking shears. I have to go."

"You have no place to go, Kris," Bradley said, pulling on her arm again. "Your Christmas wish, remember?"

"But that was just a game." Her voice took on an edge. "And now the game's *over*. I've got work I have to do—cookies to make, presents to wrap. And I have to return this stupid suit to . . ." She looked around, puzzled. Where was the *suit*?

"Would you quit worrying?" Bradley whispered in her ear. "There's the mall Santa Claus now."

He pointed across the parking lot to a red and white figure just stepping out from a side door. Kris blinked. It *was* a Santa Claus, hurrying across the icy pavement towards a knot of parked cars.

"And there's our taxi. Come along, love."

She let herself be pulled toward the intersection, where a taxi sat idling at a stop light. Bradley opened the door and they bundled themselves inside. The driver sat silently, his face in shadows. Bradley leaned over the seat, spoke to him. As the light changed, the cab took off.

"I don't get it," Kris said as Bradley leaned back. "Mrs. Spencer hired a back-up?"

Bradley gave her a sidelong look. "You *don't* get it, do you? Look, it's really very simple. You weren't around to tell your husband about the job opening at the mall, so Mrs. Spencer hired some *other* lush."

Kris frowned. "You don't have to keep calling him that."

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. But it's *my* truth. And I can't do anything about him. I've tried, believe me."

"There's always divorce court."

"Divorce." Kris let the word linger on her lips. She'd thought about it often enough, fantasized about it even. She'd be free, alone, with no one to answer to but herself. There was Marissa to consider, of course. Or at least, there *had* been Marissa, before Jeff had turned her into . . . well, into someone she wasn't sure she still loved. Or even liked. For that alone, she hated Jeff, even more than for the other stuff—the public fights, the drinking. But still, she held on. Sometimes she wondered if some part of her actually *liked* the abuse she took from Jeff, even *thrived* on it.

She glanced over at Bradley; he was looking out the side window, watching the mall lights flicker past.

"Quaint, aren't they?" he said, turning to her. The glare from the lights gave half his face a muted red glow.

"What?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Christmas lights. The colors. The pretty little sentiments."

"Sure." Kris shut her eyes and saw her Christmas tree at home, bare save for a few scant decorations, with almost no presents under it. Her daughter was pouting in the corner, the stuffed penguin Kris had gotten her tossed carelessly to the floor; Jeff loomed over her, all plaid shirt and boxer shorts and tartared teeth, handing her yet another unwrapped box of Pay 'n Save perfume. Why had she married him? Why had she *stayed* with him? Did she *really* want that? "It's all just lovely," she said bitterly.

"You don't have to think about all of that any more," Bradley said, snaking his arm around her. "You're with me now. All that's behind you."

Kris let him hold her. He felt so warm. And she had been so cold for so long. Down to her *bones* cold, down to her marrow, down to her soul. They rode together in silence.

"What are we doing *here*?"

Kris looked out on the peaceful blanket of snow that covered the cemetery. Pink granite headstones listed from the cold frost at drunken angles, topped with white fur hats, like the old women back at the bar. Pine trees bowed beneath snow-encrusted branches. The wind danced by, spinning a tarantella of ghostly flakes.

"You have *so* much to do, remember?" Bradley leaned against a bare leafless tree, his arms crossed in front of him, his cowboy boots black as jet against the white. "Your parents' wreaths?"

Kris shivered and looked behind him; a car waited at the side of the road, parking lights low and red against the white of the snow. Drop of blood against a sheet. Was it their taxi? Or something else? Something larger? The ride over was cloaked in a smoky haze. Sulphur smoke? She looked back at Bradley and saw he was carrying a spray of cedar boughs.

"It's cold here," she said, moving closer to him.

"You don't have to be cold," Bradley said, rubbing her shoulder. Her skin tingled at his touch. "I know a place much warmer. You'd like it there. No job, no responsibility, no guilt."

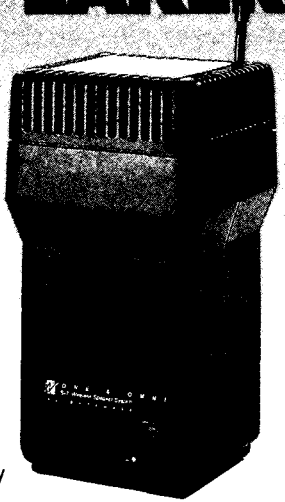
"Sounds like paradise," Kris murmured, looking out across the markers. The cemetery looked strange, empty. As if she'd wandered into another town's graveyard instead of her own. Could Bradley be right? Could a person *not exist* any more?

"Some have called it paradise," he said. "Others haven't been so kind. All depends on your point of view, I guess." His face glowed red, and Kris saw that he was smoking now. The cigarette's ember burned bright as he inhaled, then died to a small orange spark. She followed its glow until he tossed it into the white powder at his feet. With a spit, it died.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SPACE AGE SPEAKER

Imagine being able to listen to music anywhere in your home or even outdoors without having to run miles of speaker wire. You could if you had the amazing new WS7 Wireless System from Datawave.



Datawave's breakthrough design is a patented FM technology which broadcasts music wirelessly from a small transmitter to satellite speakers. The transmitter, about the size of a paperback book, broadcasts music from virtually any sound source to a receiver built into the speaker. (The transmitter taps into your stereo's signal through a simple connection to any audio output or headphone jack.)

You could listen to any component of your stereo system (CD's, records, tapes, AM/FM stereo, etc.) and enjoy deep, rich bass and crystal clear highs. The bookshelf sized, 8.5 x 4.5 x 4.5 inch cabinet, with its full range 4 inch driver mounted at the top, provides a 360 degree surround sound pattern. In addition, the speakers operate on two selectable frequencies, insuring you static-free transmission.

These speakers are self-powered, with 150 foot range through walls, providing total coverage in every home. And because the speakers have their own built-in amplifier, you can control the volume and power independently at each speaker. Best of all, they can *never* be blown out.

The WS7 operates on an AC adaptor or 4 C-batteries, which will power the speakers for about three months. The speakers even have a built-in detection circuit which automatically cuts off the speakers when you turn off your stereo.

You can operate as many speakers as you like on one transmitter. Broadcast both left and right channels to utilize one speaker in a room, or use two transmitters with two speakers to get full stereo separation.

Try these speakers **risk free** for 30 days and if they're not everything we say they are, return them for a full refund, including S&H charges. Plus, these speakers carry a full 90-day manufacturer's warranty.

- **Speaker & transmitter ...$99 ($6 S&H)**
- **Additional speakers ...$69 ea. ($6 S&H)**

Please mention promotional code AS 1108.

Call toll free 800-992-2966

To order by mail, send check or money order for total purchase (Va. residents add 4.5% sales tax), or enclose credit card # and exp. date along with name, address, and phone number to:

Comtrad
11600 Busy Street, Building 103
Richmond, VA 23236

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

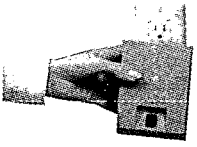
NEW! NEW! NEW!

The Amazing "Wireless" Phonejak

Converts any electrical outlet to a phone jack.

ITS QUICK AND EASY.

The *PHONEJAK* gives you all the freedom of having cordless phone technology, without the "cordless" phone. Here's how it works. The *PHONEJAK* comes complete with two units. 1. The base unit. 2. The extension unit.



The base unit plugs into your regular phone line like an answering machine. The extension unit can be plugged into any 3-pronged electric wall outlet. This extension is your instant phone jack. With this, you'll have the freedom to put your phone anywhere you like, with **unlimited extensions** at no extra charge! Plus, the base unit can transmit its crystal clear signal to any number of rooms with *PHONEJAK*

WHO SHOULD BUY ONE?

- Anyone who wants more extensions without calling the phone company.
- Anyone who wants to put the answering machine or fax into a more convenient place.
- Anyone who is moving and is not sure where to put the phone jacks.
- Renters who don't want to install permanent phone jacks.

THIS OFFER IS NOT AVAILABLE IN STORES.

The *PHONEJAK* is being offered to our readers at a special direct-to-you introductory price. This great product will carry a retail price of $140.00. But not for you. You pay only **$99** if you respond now.

We are offering you this revolutionary telephone extension system for 30% off. You pay only **$99**. ($6 shipping and handling.) This price includes the Phonex base unit plus one extension.

Plus, for a limited time you can order extra extensions for just **$69** each. And if you mention the promotional code (found below the toll-free number) you'll get a surprise mystery gift **FREE.** This free gift is yours to keep even if you decide to return the *PHONEJAK* ***So order now.***

Item#	Description	Price	S&H
PX101	PHONEJAK base +1 ext.	$99	$6
PX102	extra extension units	$69	$6

Turn every outlet into a phone jack. Plus, get crystal clear reception anywhere in your home or office with the *PHONEJAK* Most orders ship within 72 hours. Please mention promotional code **AS 1109**.

CALL TOLL-FREE 24 HOURS A DAY!

1-800-992-2966

Order Now!

To order by mail please send check or money order for the total amount including shipping and handling. Or enclose your credit card number. (VA residents add 4.5% sales tax.) Send your information to:

COMTRAD INDUSTRIES
2820 Waterford Lake Dr. Suite 106
Midlothian, Virginia 23113

VISA MasterCard DISCOVER

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come along now, love," Bradley said, starting out across the graveyard. Kris held onto the belt loop on the back of his jeans so she wouldn't slip. "We've work to do."

Kris followed, her eyes closed, listening to the rhythmic shushing sounds they made as they walked, like pancakes dropping one two, one two, onto a griddle. Looking up, she saw that it had stopped snowing.

"Here we are," Bradley said, dropping his camera bag by two tombstones. He bent and blew the frost from the epitaphs. "John and Gertrude. That's them, isn't it?"

Kris nodded, brushed snow off her parents' graves. Her mother had loved Christmas wreaths; she made dozens of them each year and gave them out to their neighbors, along with tins of cookies and fruitcake after fruitcake. If you work hard enough, her mother had once told her, you don't notice that you're unhappy.

Kris shivered suddenly, and Bradley dropped down beside her, wrapping his arm around her.

"Miss them, do you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It's always hard being an only child," Bradley said. "Even more so with them gone."

"I'm not an only child," Kris said, getting up. "At least, not technically. I've got a sister, Sibella. But we're not close. She's not into the family thing. Never has been."

"That wouldn't be your sister there, would it?" Bradley nodded towards a figure walking across the graveyard. Kris looked at the woman carefully. She *did* look a little like Sibella, only Sibella without the rough edges, the hard eyes. She was wearing a long wool coat and carrying a paper shopping bag. Kris saw a fringe of green peeking over the top of the bag.

"That *is* my sister," she whispered to Bradley. "What's she doing here?"

"Most likely the same thing *you're* doing here, love," he said. "Without *you* around, your mother was forced to instill all that guilt into your *sister*. Ah yes, I recognize those furrows!"

The woman was closer now, and Kris could see her face clearly. She looked softer, as if she'd put on a little weight. Kris watched as she took two Christmas wreaths out of the shopping bag and placed them carefully over her parents' graves. She bowed her head for a moment, then rose and quickly left, disappearing back into the blackness. Only after she'd gone did Kris realize she hadn't bothered to hide. Sibella just hadn't been able to *see* her. Bradley was right. She'd been fooling herself all night, pretending he was just a smart-ass photographer, when he was obviously something very different indeed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Some people have called me a soul-stealer, Kris," he said quietly beside her. She felt the hairs rise on her neck.

"Primitive cultures," she said. "I've read about them before."

"And some cultures not so primitive." He paused. "It's up to *you*, Kris."

She turned to face him. "What am I to you?" she whispered. "You don't know me, we never met before tonight."

Bradley reached up to touch the tip of a snow-covered cedar branch; the snow seemed to flee away from his fingers. "We've never been properly introduced, but I've known you for years," he said. She heard a whistle and slap in the air beside him. The slap of a tail? The flutter of wings? Or was it simply the windshield wipers of the waiting cab? Except that she knew somehow that it wasn't just a cab. She had a vague memory of flying through the night, of sparks and the thunder of hooves. It was up to her, he'd said. Up to her.

"You're every tortured shopper that ever tried to find a forgotten gift on Christmas Eve," Bradley said, his voice spreading out across the cemetery like mist. "You're every nervous school kid trying to memorize verse after inane verse of *Up on the House Top* for the school pageant. You're the true spirit of Christmas present, Kris, in all its wretched misery, bowing beneath the weight of your obligations just like this tree bows beneath the weight of all this snow."

He pulled the branch low, then suddenly released it. White flakes sprayed the air as the branch bounced up, free.

"What's the harm in shaking loose the burden before it snaps the branch?" he asked, watching her, his eyes flickering. Flashing red-bulbed Christmas tree lights. Candles burning at an altar. "It's *your* Christmas wish, don't you understand, love? Sure, it's a bit unorthodox, coming from a gent like myself, but these are hard times. We're all pulling double-duty, all working both sides of the fence. Come along now, don't look so forlorn. I'm giving you the opportunity to leave all this rubbish *behind* you, without the messy business of divorce courts and custody suits. It's a different life I'm offering, a life of pleasure, with none of this pain. We *never* celebrate Christmas where *I'm* from. You'll never have to wrap another overpriced present or hear another outdated carol as long as you live. And that's a long time, I guarantee it."

"Who are you?" Kris whispered, watching the branch bounce in the still night air.

"Like I said, I'm just a freelancer. From Down Under. A bit of a moonlighter, sure, but I've got to make a living, too. And they don't really mind if I kill two birds with one stone, especially when it involves such a luscious bird as yourself. Wife and mother abandoning her loved ones for the wanton desires of the flesh! That's very good, you know, especially at this time of year. And all of it with the fat man's blessing. We're not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so very different, you know. Just a bunch of chaps in red suits. Come along now, love. It's for your own good. Well, not really—but you know what I mean."

There was no car in the driveway back at the house, which didn't mean much either way, but the living room lights were all on, so Kris knew that somebody was home, whether it was Jeff her husband or Jeff not her husband. Whatever the case, she had come back to see him and to see Marissa. She owed them that much.

She stood on a corner of the lawn, in a snowless patch of brown that had once been her azaleas. She blew on her hands and shifted her weight from cold foot to cold foot, unsure what to do now that she stood within a few steps of her old life again.

Bradley's words had been seductive, oh yes. A life without obligation, without worry or frustration. But here, outside the window of what was obviously still her house, she began to lose her courage. There was the same peeling paint, the same sagging porch, and there, behind the frost on the glass, moved two shadows that were surely still her husband and child.

"You know you want it, love," a voice whispered behind her, and her heart jumped. She turned and saw a dim red glow; Bradley's face lit in the halo of a cigarette cherry. He'd followed her here then. She was glad.

"Yes, I want it. But I had to come back," she said, her words thick with cold. "I had to *see*."

"Take a look then, Kris. Go ahead."

"I'm afraid," she said, standing in the cold. "Af-f-fraid it'll be the same. That they'll see *me*. That I'll *stay*. It's so c-c-cold here. So c-c-cold." She shivered and held out her hands to him, then. He blew on them and her fingers stretched toward the warmth of his breath, renewed, tingling with the pleasure/pain of a thousand needles. He took them in his hands and pressed them to his lips, kissing her palms, licking them like a dog. Kris shivered, her body suddenly igniting like a torch. She couldn't go back to what she'd been before. Not after this.

"You said it's warm there, where you're from?" she whispered, following him as he beckoned her toward the window.

"Oh, very warm," he said, leaning against the glass. The frost melted in the heat of his breath, and Kris knelt next to him, watching the blinking colored lights through a crack in the drapes. A Christmas tree, tall shapes moving around it.

"Look in the window, love. That's right. You don't need to stay with them; they've got their own lives now."

She inched closer, wishing it were so, and saw someone in a plaid shirt stretching toward the top of the tree, something hanging from one hand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeff—decorating the *tree*? She heard laughter, a woman's laughter, high and empty.

She blinked her eyes and looked around. The living room was an explosion of ugly color. Wrapping paper, bows, poinsettias, lights. She closed her eyes; Christmas carols drifted to her through the glass. The Chipmunks singing *Away in a Manger*. Disco style. Too much color, too much noise, too much everything. She was so tired of it all.

"And you never celebrate Christmas there?" she asked, leaning towards the heat radiating from Bradley's brown leather jacket. The heat touched her arm, pulsated through her body. She would never be cold again with Bradley.

"Never. It would be downright sacreligious. Look, love, there's no need for you to compromise your life for them any longer. They've got *other* lives now. And we could always use a good martyr down where *I'm* from. Few enough come our way."

She pushed her face against the glass and peered inside. Jeff was hanging ornaments on the tree, Marissa handing them up to him from her perch on someone's lap. She could only see knees and arms and the corner of a white-lace collar. Kris shifted her position, pressing her right cheek to the glass. Now she saw perfect white teeth and short brown hair, a cameo locket and a hair bow made out of red and green plaid ribbon. Her neighbor Barbara Lacey laughed, and handed another perfectly browned baker's dough wreath up to Marissa. The child turned toward the window, and Kris saw that she was dressed identically to Barbara, down to the Christmas bow in her hair.

It was her Marissa—and yet *not* her Marissa. The child's hair was brushed and curled, and a shade lighter than the dirty blonde Kris remembered from that morning. She had on a red cotton dress much like the one Kris had yanked over her daughter's head before sending her off to daycare, but this one was crisply ironed and starched and had a white collar around the neck. This Marissa was even wearing a cameo locket; her Marissa didn't own any locket.

"They've all changed," she whispered, the glass steaming up with her breath, as hot as Bradley's now. "Jeff. Marissa. You were right. They don't need me any more. They're fine. Everybody's fine."

"Of course," Bradley said, his tongue flicking against her ear like a serpent's. "Everybody's fine. Jeff married Barbara Lacey seven years ago, after her husband left her for the clerk at the True Value. And *this* Marissa always eats her liver and never drowns kittens. In fact, she absolutely adores cats. What do you say, love? You don't want to go back *now* and *ruin* everything for them, do you? If it's good enough for old Persephone . . ."

Kris laughed and sat down in the snow in front of her old living room

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

window. "It's *my* choice?" she asked. Bradley nodded. "*My* Christmas wish. I can take it or leave it."

"Just like any other gift. You can return it if you like, but you might never get another. It's there for the taking, like an apple hanging on a tree. Same as me. Granted, you might not be interested, especially considering the bad luck you had with *this* brute, but I thought we had a certain . . . chemistry."

Think of it, a voice whispered in her head, a voice she recognized as her own. *From now on, you're free to do anything you want. Anything.* She smiled, an impish smile.

"I suppose I'll have to forfeit my soul then," she said. "That's the usual deal, isn't it?"

Bradley pursed his lips. "Well, there *is* that one little stipulation . . . But I'm sure you won't miss it. Most people find that they're more trouble than they're worth."

Kris nodded. "You're assuming, of course, that I *have* one."

Bradley looked at her, puzzled, and she nodded towards his camera bag. "How many shots would you say you took of old Santa tonight? Seventy-five? A hundred? How many pieces of my soul did you pass out to parents at the mall? It could be that I don't have enough soul left to hand over down there, you know. And all of this bother would have been for nothing."

Bradley grinned wide. She noticed how thick his hair was, especially at the top where the scarred ivory tips of two horns jutted up. "I like the way your mind works, love. I do indeed. You'll go far Down Below, I guarantee it."

Down Under. Down Below. He cloaked it in quaint euphemisms, but she knew Bradley was talking about Hell. Still in all, it seemed a better home than the one she'd had on earth.

She heard a sound from the road, and looked over to see a coach sitting where the cab had been. Black horses stamped their feet in the snow, their eyes red with flame. The door to the coach stood open. It was black inside, although not as black as Jeff's laughter when he hit her. She turned back towards the window. Jeff was handing Barbara Lacey a garishly-wrapped package, about the size of the cheap Pay 'n Save perfume he gave her every year. He smiled, and even from where she sat, she could almost see the tartar on his teeth, almost smell the sourness of the beer on his breath.

"Let's go," Kris said and took Bradley's hand.

There were hells . . . and then there were *hells.* ●

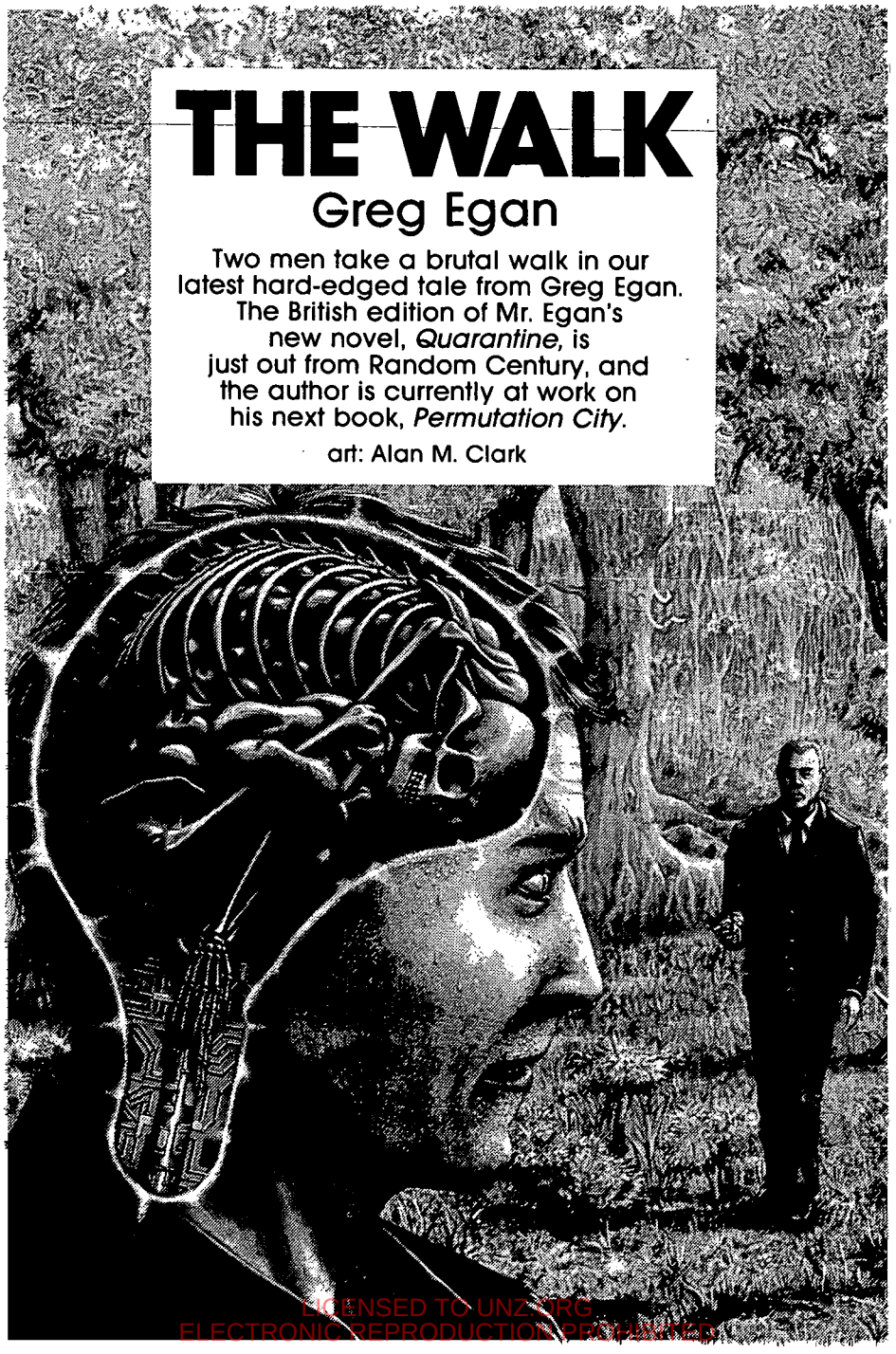
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WALK

Greg Egan

Two men take a brutal walk in our latest hard-edged tale from Greg Egan. The British edition of Mr. Egan's new novel, *Quarantine*, is just out from Random Century, and the author is currently at work on his next book, *Permutation City*.

art: Alan M. Clark



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Leaves and twigs crunch underfoot with every step; no gentle rustling, but the sharp, snapping sounds of irrevocable, unrepeatable damage—as if to hammer into my brain the fact that no one else has come this way for some time. Every footfall proclaims that there'll be no help, no interruptions, no distractions.

I've felt weak and giddy since we left the car—and part of me is still hoping that I'll simply pass out, collapse on the spot and never get up again. My body, though, shows no signs of obliging: it stubbornly acts as if each step forward is the easiest thing in the world, as if its sense of balance is unimpaired, as if all the fatigue and nausea is entirely within my head. I could fake it: I could sink to the ground and refuse to stir. *Get it over with.*

I don't, though.

Because I don't want it to be *over.*

I try again.

"Carter, you could be *rich,* man. I'd work for you for the rest of my life." Good touch, that: *my* life, not *your* life; makes it sound like a better deal. "You know how much I made for Finn, in *six months?* Half a million! Add it up."

He doesn't reply. I stop walking, and turn back to face him. He halts too, keeping his distance. Carter doesn't look much like an executioner. He must be close to sixty: gray-haired, with a weathered, almost kindly face. He's still solidly built, but he looks like someone's once-athletic grandfather, a boxer or a football player forty years ago, now into vigorous gardening.

He calmly waves me on with the gun.

"Further. We've passed the people-taking-a-piss zone, but campers, bush walkers . . . you can't be too careful."

I hesitate. He gives me a gently admonishing look. *If I stood my ground?* He'd shoot me right here, and carry the body the rest of the way. I can see him trudging along, with my corpse slung casually across his shoulders. However *decent* he might seem at first glance, the truth is, the man's a fucking robot: he's got some kind of neural implant, some bizarre religion; everybody knows that.

I whisper, "Carter . . . *please.*"

He gestures with the gun.

I turn and start walking again.

I still don't understand how Finn caught me out. I thought I was the best hacker he had. Who could have followed my trail, from the outside? *Nobody!* He must have planted someone inside one of the corporations I was screwing on his behalf—just to check up on me, the paranoid bastard. And I never kept more than ten percent. I wish I'd taken fifty. I wish I'd made it worthwhile.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I strain my ears, but I can't pick up the faintest hint of traffic, now; just birdsong, insects, the crackling of the forest's debris underfoot. Fucking *nature.* I refuse to die here. I want to end my life like a human being: in Intensive Care, high on morphine, surrounded by cripplingly expensive doctors and brutal, relentless, life-support machines. Then the corpse can go into orbit—preferably around the sun. I don't care how much it costs, just so long as I don't end up part of any fucking natural cycle: carbon, phosphorus, nitrogen. *Gaia, I divorce thee.* Go suck the nutrients out of someone *else,* you grasping bitch!

Wasted anger, wasted time. *Please don't kill me, Carter: I can't bear to be absorbed back into the unthinking biosphere.* That'd really move him.

What, then?

"I'm *twenty-five years old,* man. I haven't even *lived.* I've spent the last ten years farting around with computers. I don't even have any kids. How can you kill someone who hasn't even had kids?" For a second, seduced by my own rhetoric, I seriously think about claiming virginity—but that might be pushing it . . . and it sounds less selfish, less hedonistic, to assert my right to fatherhood than to whine about sex.

Carter laughs. "You want immortality through *children*? Forget it. I've got two sons, myself. They're nothing like me. They're total strangers."

"Yeah? That's sad. But I still ought to have the chance."

"The chance to do what? To pretend that you'll live on through your children? To fool yourself?"

I laugh knowingly—trying to make it sound like we're sharing a joke that only two like-minded cynics could appreciate.

"Of course I want a chance to *fool myself.* I want to lie to myself for fifty more years. Sounds pretty good to me."

He doesn't reply.

I slow down slightly, shortening my stride, feigning trouble with the uneven terrain. *Why?* Do I seriously think that a few extra minutes will give me the chance to formulate some dazzlingly brilliant plan? Or am I just buying time for the sake of it? Just prolonging the agony?

I pause, and suddenly find myself retching; the convulsions run deep, but nothing comes up except a faint taste of acid. When it's over, I wipe the sweat and tears from my face, and try to stop shaking—hating more than anything the fact that I care about my *dignity,* the fact that I *do* give a shit whether or not I die in a pool of vomit, weeping like a child. As if this walk to my death is all that matters, now; as if these last few minutes of my life have superseded everything else.

They have, though, haven't they? Everything else is past, is gone.

Yes—and so will this be *gone.* If I am going to die, there's no need to "make peace" with myself, no reason to "compose myself" for death. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way I face extinction is just as fleeting, just as irrelevant, as the way I faced every other moment of my life.

The one and only thing that could make this time *matter* would be finding a way to survive.

When I catch my breath, I try to stretch out the delay.

"Carter, how many times have you done this?"

"Thirty-three."

Thirty-three. That's hard enough to swallow when some jilted gun fetishist squeezes the trigger of his submachine gun and firehoses a crowd, but thirty-three leisurely strolls into the forest. . . .

"So tell me: how do most people take it? I really want to know. Do they puke? Do they cry? Do they beg?"

He shrugs. "Sometimes."

"Do they try to bribe you?"

"Almost always."

"But you can't be bought?"

He doesn't reply.

"Or—has nobody made the right offer? What do you want, if it isn't money? *Sex?*" His face remains impassive—there's no scowl of revulsion—so instead of making a joke of it, retracting what might have been an insult, I press on, light-headed. "Is that it? Do you want me to suck your cock? If that's what you want, I'll do it."

He gives me that admonishing look again. No contempt for my spineless pleading, no disgust at my misjudged offer; just the mildest irritation that I'm wasting his time.

I laugh weakly, to hide my humiliation at this absolute indifference—this refusal to find me even pitiful.

I say, "So, people take it pretty badly. How do *you* take it?"

He says, matter-of-factly, "I take it pretty well."

I wipe my face again. "Yeah, you *do*, don't you? Is that what the chip in your brain is for? To let you sleep at night after you've done this?"

He hesitates, then says, "In a way. But it's not as simple as that." He waves the gun. "Get moving. We've still got further to go."

I turn, thinking numbly: *I've just told the one man who could save my life that he's a brain-damaged, sub-human killing machine.*

I start walking again.

I glance up, once, at the blank idiot sky, and refuse to take delivery of the flood of memories linked in my mind to the same astonishing blue. *All of that is gone, it's over.* No Proustian flashbacks, no Billy Pilgrim time-tripping for me. I have no need to flee into the past: I'm going to live into the future, I'm going to survive this. *How?* Carter may be merciless, and incorruptible—in which case, I'm simply going to have to overpower him. I may have led a sedentary existence, but I'm less than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

half his age; that has to count for something. At the very least, I must be faster on my feet. *Overpower him? Struggle with a loaded gun?* Maybe I won't have to; maybe I'll get a chance to *run.*

Carter says, "Don't waste your time trying to think up ways to bargain with me. It's not going to happen. You'd be better off thinking of ways to accept the inevitable."

"I don't want to fucking *accept it.*"

"That's not true. You don't want it to *happen*—but it *will* happen. So find a way to deal with it. You must have thought about death, before now."

This is all I need: grief counseling from my own assassin. "If you want to know the truth: not once. One more thing I never got around to. So why don't you give me a decade or two to sort it out?"

"It won't take a decade. It won't take long at all. Look at it this way: Does it bother you that there are places outside your skin—*and you're not in them?* That you come to a sudden end at the top of your skull—and then there's nothing but air? Of course not. So why should it bother you that there'll be times when you won't be around—any more than you care that there are places you don't occupy? You think your life is going to be undone—canceled out, somehow—just because it has an end? Does the space above your head cancel out your body? Everything has *boundaries.* Nothing stretches on forever—in any direction."

In spite of myself, I laugh; he's gone from the sadistic to the surreal. "You believe that shit, do you? You actually think that way?"

"No. I could have; it's on the market—and I seriously considered buying it. It's a perfectly valid point of view . . . but in the end, it just didn't ring true for me—and I didn't *want it* to ring true. I chose something else entirely. Stop here."

"What?"

"I said stop."

I look around, bewildered, refusing to believe that we've *arrived.* We're nowhere special—hemmed in, as ever, between the ugly eucalypts; calf deep in the drought-shriveled undergrowth—but what did I expect? *An artificial clearing? A picnic spot?*

I turn to face him, scouring my paralyzed brain for some strategy to get within reach of the gun—or get out of his range before he can fire—when he says, with perfect sincerity, "I can help you. I can make this easier." I stare at him for a second, then break into long, clumsy, choking sobs.

He waits, patiently, until I finally manage to cough up the word: "How?"

With his left hand, he reaches into his shirt pocket, takes out a small

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

object, and holds it up for inspection on his outstretched palm. For a moment, I think it's a capsule, some kind of drug—but it's not.

Not quite.

It's a neural implant applicator. Through the transparent casing, I can just make out the gray speck of the implant itself.

I have an instant, vivid fantasy of walking forward to accept it: my chance, at last, to disarm him.

"Catch." He tosses the device straight at my face, and I put up a hand and grab it from the air.

He says, "It's up to you, of course. I'm not going to force you to use it."

Flies settle on my wet face as I stare at the thing. I brush them away with my free hand. "What'll this give me? Twenty seconds of cosmic bliss before you blow my brains out? Some hallucination so vivid it'll make me think this was all a dream? If you wanted to spare me the pain of knowing I was going to die, you should have just shot me in the back of the head five minutes ago, when I still thought I had a chance."

He says, "It's not an hallucination. It's a set of . . . attitudes. A philosophy, if you like."

"What *philosophy?* All that crap about . . . *boundaries in space and time?*"

"No. I told you, I didn't buy that."

I almost crack up. "So this is *your religion?* You want to convert me, before you kill me? You want to save my fucking *soul?* Is that how you cope with slaughtering people? *You think you're saving their souls?*"

He shakes his head, unoffended. "I wouldn't call it a religion. There is no god. There are no souls."

"No? Well, if you're offering me all the comforts of atheism, I don't need an implant for that."

"Are you afraid of dying?"

"What do you think?"

"If you use the implant, you won't be."

"You want to render me terminally brave, and then kill me? Or terminally *numb*? I'd rather be blissed out."

"Not brave. Or numb. Perceptive."

He may not have found me pitiful, but I'm still human enough to do him the honor. "*Perceptive?* You think swallowing some pathetic lie about death is *perceptive?*"

"No lies. This implant won't change your beliefs on any question of fact."

"I don't *believe* in life after death, so—"

"Whose life?"

"What?"

"When you die, will other people live on?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For a moment, I just can't speak. I'm fighting for my life—and he's treating the whole thing like some abstract philosophical debate. I almost scream: *Stop playing with me! Get it over with!*

But I don't want it to be *over*.

And as long as I can keep him talking, there's still the chance that I can rush him, the chance of a distraction, the chance of some miraculous reprieve.

I take a deep breath. "Yes, *other people will live on*."

"Billions. Perhaps hundreds of billions, in centuries to come."

"No shit. I've never believed that the universe would vanish when I died. But if you think that's some great consolation—"

"How different can two humans be?"

"I don't know. You're pretty fucking *different*."

"Out of all those hundreds of billions, don't you think there'll be people who are *just like you?*"

"What are you talking about now? Reincarnation?"

"No. Statistics. There can be no 'reincarnation'—there are no souls to be reborn. But eventually—by pure chance—someone will come along who'll embody everything that defines you."

I don't know why, but the crazier this gets, the more hopeful I'm beginning to feel—as if Carter's crippled powers of reasoning might make him vulnerable in other ways.

I say, "That's just not true. How could anyone end up with my memories, my experiences—"

"Memories don't matter. Your experiences don't define you. The accidental details of your life are as superficial as your appearance. They may have shaped who you are—but they're not an intrinsic part of it. There's a core, a deep abstraction—"

"A soul by any other name. . . ."

"No."

I shake my head, vehemently. There's nothing to be gained by humoring him; I'm too bad an actor to make it convincing—and an argument can only buy me more time.

"You think I should feel better about dying because . . . sometime in the future, some total stranger might have a few abstract traits in common with me?"

"You said that you wished you'd had children."

"I lied."

"Good. Because they're not the answer."

"And I should get more comfort from the thought of someone who's no relation at all, with no memories of mine, no sense of continuity—"

"How much do you have in common, now, with *yourself* when you were five years old?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not much."

"Don't you think there must be thousands of people who are infinitely more like you—as you are now—than that child ever was?"

"Maybe. In some ways, maybe."

"What about when you were ten? Fifteen?"

"What does it matter? Okay: people change. *Slowly. Imperceptibly.*"

He nods. "Imperceptibly—exactly! But does that make it any less *real*? Who's swallowed the lie? It's seeing the life of your body as the life of *one person* that's the illusion. The idea that 'you' are made up of all the events since your birth is nothing but a useful fiction. That's not a person: it's a composite, a mosaic."

I shrug. "Perhaps. It's still the closest thing to . . . *an identity* . . . that anyone can possess."

"But it isn't! And it distracts us from the truth!" Carter is growing impassioned, but there's no hint of fanaticism in his demeanor. I almost wish he'd start ranting—but instead he continues, more calmly, more reasonably than ever. "I'm not saying that memories make no difference; of course they do. But there's a part of you that's independent of them—and that part will live again. One day, someone, somewhere, will think as you did, act as you did. Even if it's only for a second or two, *that person will be you.*"

I shake my head. I'm beginning to feel stupefied by this relentless dream-logic—and I'm dangerously close to losing touch with what's at stake.

I say flatly, "This is bullshit. Nobody could think that way."

"You're wrong. *I do.* And you can—if you want to."

"Well, I don't *want to.*"

"I know it seems absurd to you, now—but I promise you, the implant would change all that." He absent-mindedly massages his right forearm. It must be stiff from holding the gun. "You can die afraid, or you can die reassured. It's your decision."

I close my fist over the applicator. "Do you offer this to all your victims?"

"Not all. A few."

"And how many have used it?"

"None so far."

"I'm not surprised. Who'd want to die like that? Fooling themselves?"

"You said you did."

"Live. I said I wanted to *live*, fooling myself."

I brush the flies from my face, for the hundredth time; they alight again, fearlessly. Carter is five meters away; if I take a step in his direction, he'll shoot me in the head, without the slightest hesitation. I strain my ears, and hear nothing but crickets.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Using the implant would buy me more time: the four or five minutes before it takes effect. What have I got to lose? *Carter's reluctance to kill me, 'unenlightened'?* In the end, that's made no difference, thirty-three times before. *My will to stay alive?* Maybe; maybe not. A change in my intellectual views about mortality need not render me utterly supine; even believers in a glorious afterlife have been known to struggle hard to postpone the trip.

Carter says softly, "Make up your mind. I'm going to count to ten."

The chance to die honestly? The chance to cling to my own fear and confusion to the end?

Fuck that. If I die, then it makes no difference *how I faced it.* That's *my* philosophy.

I say, "Don't bother." I push the applicator deep into my right nostril, and squeeze the trigger. There's a faint sting as the implant burrows into my nasal membranes, heading for the brain.

Carter laughs with delight. I almost join him. *From out of nowhere, I have five more minutes to save my life.*

I say, "Okay, I've done what you wanted. But everything I said before still stands. Let me live, and I'll make you rich. A million a year. *At least.*"

He shakes his head. "You're dreaming. Where would I go? Finn would track me down in a week."

"You wouldn't need to *go* anywhere. I'd skip the country—and I'd pay your money into an orbital account."

"Yeah? Even if you did, what use would the money be to me? I couldn't risk spending it."

"Once you had enough, you could buy some security. Buy some independence. Start disentangling yourself from Finn."

"No." He laughs again. "Why are you still looking for a way out? Don't you understand? *There's no need.*"

By now, the implant must have disgorged its nanomachines, to build links between my brain and the tiny optical processor whose neural net embodies Carter's bizarre beliefs. Short-circuiting my own attitudes; hard-wiring his insanity into my brain. But no matter—I can always get it removed; that's the easiest thing in the world. *If it's still what I want.*

I say, "There's *no need* for anything. There's *no need* for you to kill me. We can still both walk out of here. Why do you act like you have no choice?"

He shakes his head. "You're dreaming."

"Fuck you! *Listen to me!* All Finn has is *money.* I can ruin him, if that's what it takes. From the other side of the world!" I don't even know whether or not I'm lying anymore. Could I do that? To save my life?

Carter says softly, finally, "No."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I don't know what to say. I have no more arguments, no more pleas. I almost turn and run, but I can't do it. I can't believe that I'd get away—and I can't bring myself to make him pull the trigger a moment sooner.

The sunshine is dazzling; I close my eyes against the glare. I haven't given up. I'll pretend that the implant has failed—that should disconcert him, buy me a few more minutes.

And then?

A wave of giddiness sweeps over me. I stagger, but regain my balance. I stand, staring at my shadow on the ground, swaying gently, feeling impossibly light.

Then I look up, squinting. "I—"

Carter says, "You're going to die. I'm going to shoot you through the skull. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"But it's not the end of you. Not the end of what matters. You believe that, don't you?"

I nod, begrudgingly. "Yes."

"You know you're going to die—but you're not afraid?"

I close my eyes again; the light still hurts them. I laugh wearily. "You're wrong: I'm still afraid. You lied about that, didn't you? You shit. But I understand. Everything you said makes sense now."

And it does. All my objections seem absurd now; transparently ill-conceived. I resent the fact that Carter was right—but I can't pretend that my reluctance to believe him was the product of anything but short-sightedness and self-deception. That it took *a neural implant* to enable me to see the obvious only proves how confused I must have been.

I stand, eyes shut, feeling the warm sunshine on the back of my neck. Waiting.

"You don't want to die . . . but you know it's the only way out? You accept that now?" He sounds reluctant to believe me, as if he finds my instant conversion too good to be true.

I scream at him: "Yes, fuck you! *Yes!* So get it over with! *Get it over with!*"

He's silent for a while. Then there's a soft thud, and a crash in the undergrowth.

The flies on my arms and face desert me.

After a moment, I open my eyes and sink to my knees, shaking. For a while, I lose myself: sobbing, banging the ground with my fists, tearing up handfuls of weeds, screaming at the birds for silence.

Then I scramble to my feet and walk over to the corpse.

He believed everything he claimed to believe—but he still needed something more. More than the abstract hope of someone, sometime,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

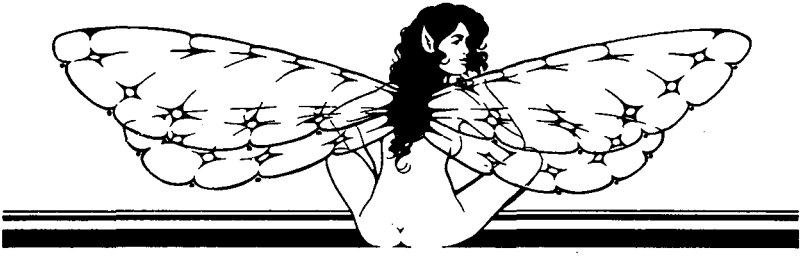
somewhere on the planet, falling into alignment—*becoming him*—by pure chance. He needed someone else holding the very same beliefs, right before his eyes at the moment of death—someone else who "knew" that they were going to die, someone else who was just as afraid as he was.

And what do *I* believe?

I look up at the sky, and the memories I fought away, before, start tumbling through my skull. From lazy childhood holidays, to the very last weekend I spent with my ex-wife, the same heartbreaking blue runs through them all. Unites them all.

Doesn't it?

I look down at Carter, nudge him with my foot, and whisper, "Who died today? Tell me. Who really died?" ●



NEXT ISSUE

New writer **Maureen F. McHugh** returns to these pages next month with a new novella, our lead story for Mid-December, "Render Unto Caesar," an exciting and suspenseful chase through a Post-Holocaust Midwest, on bicycles, with life itself the forfeit in this *particular* race, if you don't peddle hard enough and keep *on* peddling.... Hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum,** author of the popular "Drylands" series, is also on hand for Mid-December, taking us to an evocatively drawn near-future New Mexico, to the famous artist's colony at Taos, now gone high-tech in some surprising ways, for a compelling study of one man's crisis of conscience and creativity, faith and identity, all played out against the background of "The Stone Garden."

ALSO IN MID-DECEMBER: **Tim Sullivan** returns after too long an absence (write fewer movie scripts, Tim, and *more* stories!) with a chilling look at a man who literally has the weight of the world on his shoulders, in "Atlas at 8 A.M."; Philip K. Dick Award-winner **Richard Paul Russo** spins us through a wild phantasmagoria of Alternate Realities, shepherded along by a *very* dangerous woman, in "Just Drive, She Said"; new writer **A.J. Austin** makes his *Asimov's* debut

(Continued on page 135)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHRISTMAS DAY, GIVE OR TAKE A WEEK

by Lawrence Schimel

The gods were a-carolling in Midgard.

They spilled out of the Plaza Hotel into the soft white of Fimbulwinter.
The women first, clustering on the sidewalk:
Frigga in mink, Freya sable over feathers, imposing
silhouettes carved from the pale air,
the Lady Sif a heavenly face, blurred around the edges,
her ermine melting into the snow.
Their escorts joined them, having neatly dispatched the bill
with the razor-sharp edges of their Visas and American Expresses.
They adjusted 100 percent virgin wool scarves, rabbit-fur
lined gloves,
buttoned cashmere overcoats against the cold, Hugo Boss,
Emporio Armani.
Their stomachs full and warm, their minds
surfeited with dinner conversation,
they were oblivious to the weather, coming down
light and slow for now, like muted television static
shown at half speed.
Ragnarok had barely begun;
there would be plenty of time for blizzards later on
when the giants came out of Jotunheim.

Bragi led a round of "Deck The Halls" as they turned
onto Central Park West. Uller and Sigurd got a guffaw or two
for "Deck them all." Then Halvord went berserk,
tumbling into a snowbank in a fit of mirth.
They pulled him to his feet, dusted his tails,
only to join him in the snow a moment later
when they saw it, too: coming toward them from the park,
Odin, done up in red wool with ermine trim,
Sleipnir, snorting wildly, shaking his head
until the tied-on antlers came loose from his brow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Laughter died to breathless wheezes, tears freezing
into icicles on beards and chins, when Heimdall
(a band of fifty temps filling in for him on bridge duty)
passed around a skin of Spanish leather, full of eggnog
and ensorceled so as never to run dry.
They drank, glanced at Odin again, and the laughter
returned, bubbling over. Chuckling deeply,
Odin pulled a silver wassail cup (an authentic Paul Revere)
from bottomless Gucci saddlebags
(last year's Yuletide gift from Freyr and his sister).
It was brimming with ale and as it was passed
Bragi started them into "Here We Come A-Wassailing,"
leading them into the park, into the snow.

Idun opened her purse and rummaged,
lipstick, keys, apples all spilling out until, triumphant,
she found the mistletoe and passed it around.
The goddesses leapt from the ladies' room and ambushed Baldr,
burying him in an avalanche of kisses and hugs.
Jealous, the gods threw snowballs.
One straggling goddess stumbles late from the bathroom,
wobbling in her heels as she runs after Baldr with her mistletoe,
mugging him for the sum of five minutes of love.
They tumble into a snowbank; Loki's wig slides off.
"Hey there, sailor," he whispers before kissing Baldr.
Loki rises, dashing back to the ladies' room
to readjust his drag
By the time they tried to help him up
Baldr was as chill as the unnatural snow.
Under his shirt they found the sprig of mistletoe
piercing his heart.
Thor knocks down the ladies' room searching,
bits of stone and plumbing scattering across the park;
Loki is nowhere to be found
and their next carol is a keen.

Yggdrasil broods over Rockefeller Center, her
decorated branches
dusted with snow over leaf and ornament alike.
She consoles herself, as fate unwinds before her and the cold
makes her sap-thoughts congeal, that in the morning,
after the sun rises to warm the world, she would open the presents
that rested at her base, and release mankind into a new world.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THANATROPE

Mark W. Tiedemann

The author's stories have appeared in *Asimov's, Universe II,* and *F&SF,* and he has just completed his first novel, *They Will Dream of Stars, They Will Live in Peace.*

Chloe Richards looked up from the holographic display when the door opened. For a few seconds she was confused and disoriented. The man entering the room—tall, almost gaunt, greying black hair and intense blue eyes—looked identical to the man in the holo projection. *You're dead though,* she thought. She put the display on pause.

"Victor," she said.

"Chloe, have you seen Peter?"

She stood and smiled. "Peter? Peter Cooper? Not lately."

"Hmm." Victor pursed his lips and sighed. "He's here, you know. I invited him for the weekend. Ben and I have a good game going and I decided Peter would make a perfect foil."

"You didn't tell me you were inviting him."

Victor shrugged. "He's not in his room, he must be wandering around the grounds. If you see him tell him to meet me in the game room." He started for the opposite door.

"Victor." She clenched her hands once. Her stomach felt fuzzy and warm. He stopped, his back to her. "I talked to my analyst yesterday."

"Chloe, I really—"

"He told me—"

"I *really* don't want to hear it."

She fumbled around her words. She remembered clearly what her analyst had said, but she found it almost impossible to say it.

"He said," she continued carefully, "that I'm too dependent on you. On your memory. That I have a very low capacity for self-appreciation. I need you around so I won't take risks—"

"So you won't be tempted to take another lover?" He smiled sadly. "I could have told you that. In fact, I *have* told you that. Isn't that the reason you had me resurrected?"

Chloe stiffened. Her analyst had also suggested that she enjoyed the abuse. Right now that was hard to believe. She felt seized by him, as if he had just tied her up. She had no control.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I want to get to my game," he smiled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wolfishly. "We're in the final movements of the North African campaign. I'm Rommel. Ben's Montgomery. I've been kicking his ass through the whole thing."

"Why invite Peter?"

"Oh, I want him to be Patton. It should be interesting. He *is* the man who put me together. I'd like to see if he really knows his work." He laughed shortly, then glanced at the holo. "You really shouldn't watch those, you know. He's dead. Time to put him away, don't you think?"

He winked at her and disappeared through the doors. Chloe shuddered and turned back to the holo.

"By the way."

She looked toward the doors. Victor leaned into the room, grinning.

"I got you some flowers. They're in your room."

Chloe watched him leave and continued to stare at the door, more confused than ever.

The house, like the grounds, sprawled, hallways running like an ant hive through the four levels. Victor had enjoyed adding on. He had been a compulsive collector and more than half the rooms were like museums. There was a stamp room, a tapestry room, a wine glass room, a festival mask room, a gun room, a rare book room. A room devoted to her, with memorabilia, portraits, objects from her life. In the first months of their marriage, Chloe occasionally stumbled onto new construction. After his heart attack, she had ordered the only unfinished section completed and planned to do no more.

Peter was in the west wing. She knocked on his door and entered at his invitation.

He was a stocky man, light brown hair and hazel eyes. He hugged her gently.

"Chloe, how are you?"

"You didn't tell me you were coming."

"Victor's invitation was something of a surprise."

His luggage stood by the closet, still packed. Beside the two big suitcases were two smaller cases bearing the BioRec logo.

"You're expecting to stay awhile?" she asked.

Peter glanced at the baggage. "I'm not sure. Victor said he thought you needed to talk to me. I came prepared for anything. I thought it might be a good opportunity to see how he's doing, too."

"Mmm."

Peter sat down on the edge of the bed. "How *is* he doing?"

Chloe drew a deep breath. She was not really prepared to talk about this. Not yet, not here. Perhaps it would have been easier in Peter's office.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Peter . . . what are my options? With Victor."

"Options? How do you mean?"

"What if—well, what if I don't want him anymore?"

Peter whistled. "That bad, huh?"

"I didn't say that."

"BioRec retains no privileges concerning the dispensation of our services. Once you've signed the contract we have neither the right nor obligation to interfere with your management of the material."

"Material." She mouthed the word once more: ugly. "I need advice, Peter."

"You weren't interested when I offered it before."

"You were offering more than advice."

"True. But I thought I might have a better chance than a corpse."

Peter looked away, as if shocked by his own words. Chloe headed for the door. Peter was suddenly there, blocking her.

"Please," he said. "I'm sorry. That's past now, I've worked through it. Please, sit down. Tell me your complaint. Please."

Chloe considered leaving. She needed to talk to someone. Peter was the only one who really understood the situation. Her analyst did not even know what a resurrect was. Finally she crossed the room to a chair and stared out the window.

"Victor is . . . abusive." She grimaced. This was not easy. Victor—husband, lover, dearly departed and sorely missed. Recovered at great expense and now somehow not what she had expected. "It's hard to describe. He doesn't have consideration for our relationship. Everything is so coarse, blunt." She shook her head. "On our anniversary he woke me up, gave me a card, a kiss, ordered breakfast for me, then went out and rode horses all damn day. It's like the occasion was just a date on a calendar and a chore he had to perform." She tried to picture Victor as he had been. The image was slippery, though. "Once, not long before Victor died, I broke my foot riding. Victor was in England at the time, on business. That evening, after I got home from the hospital, twelve dozen roses were delivered with a note that said 'These are for your foot. For the rest of you I have something better. Love, Victor.' He canceled the rest of the trip and came home early. He brought home a bottle of Crystal Rose and we had crab rangoon and mussels in bed." She shook her head. "The resurrect—"

"Reconstruct, please."

"—never does that. He avoids me, treats me like an obligation. He never leaves the estate, but usually I have to go looking for him if I want to see him. And then I feel guilty for needing him. I'm always interrupting, usually one of his damn games."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peter sighed. "That's one of the reasons we don't do reconstructions like this."

Chloe shot him an annoyed glare. "You claim to reconstruct personalities. Like the original, your literature says."

"No, it says *almost* like the original. Most of our reconstructs are for the government, the rest for businesses. Key individuals who possessed some quirk that made them necessary, or perhaps their continuation was necessary to a project. In such cases only the gross capacities of that individual are needed. Finer nuances of personality aren't. We hit it pretty close for the most part, but the reconstructs are never intended to be fully realized personalities. We're very uncomfortable about this sort of thing. I went out on a hell of a limb for you, Chloe. It's experimental and controversial."

"I appreciate that. I'm sure you had my best interests in mind. The money helped, too."

He winced. "I didn't do it for money," he said quietly.

"You've made a mistake, though. What I have is not Victor, not even grossly. It's like you left something out when you . . . put him together. Victor was never so cruel to me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! My god, he was my *husband!* I *loved* him! I could never love anyone who made me feel so ashamed and—and insignificant! You knew him, too! He wasn't a cruel man!"

Peter nodded. "I knew him." He looked away for a few seconds. "Look: I brought everything I used in reconstructing his personality—psych profiles, personal history, business history, educational background, testimonials, charts of the DNA template we took from his brain. I'll observe him for a couple of days, see what I can come up with, and go over the material."

Chloe stood. "Thank you, Peter."

"But you might want to ask yourself if what you remember of Victor is consistent with what he really was. He was only thirty-eight when he died, he was under a tremendous amount of stress. Maybe there were factors involved of which you were never aware."

Chloe frowned. She left feeling more uneasy than ever.

Victor came to bed very late. Chloe had stopped counting the nights he did this; she had confused them with the nights he simply did not come to bed at all. She slept tenuously until she felt the shift of the mattress, the sheets, the sensation like gravity indicating someone beside her. Tonight she opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling.

He did not move. Slowly, Chloe turned onto her side and looked at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him. He lay on his back, rigid, hands folded over his chest, his breath shallow.

She concentrated on him, silently wishing he would speak, move, touch her, *roll over!* What good was it to have her husband back if he did not acknowledge her presence, even in bed?

Cautiously, she reached toward him, afraid he might slap her hand away. He seemed yards away in the darkness, but she finally brushed her fingers against his arm. He still did not move. Encouraged, Chloe rested her hand on his shoulder. His skin was not cold, but it lacked real warmth. She squeezed.

Victor rolled over—not quickly, but purposefully—grasped her shoulder and pushed her back. Before she could react, he opened her nightgown, settled himself between her legs, and entered her. She caught her breath, startled, frightened, and excited. He moved methodically. Chloe kept her hands on his shoulders as if ready to push him away, then wrapped her legs around him.

He still loves me, she thought. Her body responded, moved with his rhythm, his constant, evenly metered strokes, his calm, studious concentration—

She pushed up against him, her mouth open, orgasm drawing her muscles tight.

Victor said nothing. He rolled away and resumed his pose on his back, hands on his chest, his breath coming no heavier.

Chloe huddled against the far edge of the bed, shaking.

Peter came out on the patio. Chloe looked up from her magazine. He was dressed for riding.

"Good morning," he said, sitting down.

"Good morning." She licked her lips quickly and glanced back at the house. "Where's Victor?"

"Getting ready. He invited me to go riding with him. I'm not great on a horse, but it will give me more opportunity to watch him."

"Do you have any ideas yet?"

Peter looked uncomfortable. "Chloe—look, I'm not sure yet, okay? But I may have an idea that at least part of this problem is you."

"Me?"

"Your—expectations. You see, the problem is that what you bought is as close a reconstruction as it is possible to get to in an organic robot. Victor—the one you knew—is not alive. What you bought from us is a very sophisticated approximation of that man. If you're expecting him to *be* Victor, then you're setting yourself up for disappointment."

Chloe shook her head. "I don't see the difference."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peter looked exasperated. "We *program* these reconstructs, like computers. We get damn close to human mimicry. But close isn't the same thing. There are some things we just can't write in."

"Like what?"

"Well . . . like the ability to lie to themselves."

Chloe blinked. "You sound like my analyst now."

"It's a problem we run into trying to translate human psychology into cybernetics. Humans deceive themselves easily, constantly." He laughed lightly, as if mildly surprised at himself. "We're always telling ourselves lies, hiding things from ourselves. Little things—feelings, behaviors—we don't like them so we try to forget them and tell ourselves they aren't there. But they are. The memories never go away. The brain reprograms itself constantly to handle the contradictions. That's why a person can go out and be a thief or a murderer or a son-of-a-bitch to the world and come home and be a loving, caring mate. Both aspects are true to his character, yet they contradict each other. We handle it. Computers don't."

"Are you suggesting I didn't know my husband?"

Peter looked hurt. "I'm suggesting you knew the man you wanted to know. Victor Richards—for whatever reason—hid the rest from you. The reconstruct can't."

Chloe opened her mouth to answer, but she did not know what to say. She felt anxious. She wanted to tell Peter that he was wrong, but it was important that she know *why* he was wrong, and she could not figure that one.

She looked up suddenly. "Then . . . the only way to deal with that—program-wise, at least—would be to leave some of the more difficult—what would you call them?—objects of contradiction out of him. He wouldn't be complete."

Peter looked uncomfortable.

"Ready, Peter?"

Victor came onto the patio. Peter stood. Chloe looked at him, startled.

"Chloe," Victor said, smiling smugly, "you look like you've seen a ghost."

"That's not amusing," she said.

"Oh? I think it is. Ready, Peter?"

"Uh, sure. See you later, Chloe."

They walked away, Victor's hand on Peter's neck. It did not occur to her until they were out of her sight that Victor had not invited her along. *I must be getting used to being ignored,* she thought.

She went indoors. For a short while she wandered aimlessly, glancing into a museum room from time to time. She paused in her room, the one dedicated to her. She took in all the photographs, the books, old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dresses—her wedding gown was mounted in a glass case—and the two small busts on the fireplace mantle. They were made of ivory—illegal to possess—and were excellent sculptures of Victor and her, each about three inches high. Usually the busts made her smile; now she felt hollow, displaced. She frowned, then headed purposefully for Peter's room. Her thumbprint operated all the locks in the house. She stepped inside, closed the door, and stood still while her heart slammed.

Then she opened the BioRec filecase. There, on top, were the discs containing all the information used in the reconstruct. She held them carefully. She had never seen this data; Peter had assured her that a lot of it was incomprehensible, digital reductions of behavior patterns, chemical trails, fossil neuronal functions in the brain slices.

She felt like someone else. Chloe Richards did not do this sort of thing. Chloe Richards did not read other people's mail, go through their laundry, try to read their minds.

What had Peter said, though, about the way humans hide things from themselves . . . ?

She slipped a disc into the terminal on the desk. She began to read.

Chloe was on her third brandy when they returned. She drank seldom, so the liquor hit her hard. Snatches of history chased through her mind as she tried to sort things out. It had taken BioRec two years to produce the resurrect—no, the *reconstruct*, she corrected herself; she always slipped back into the slang term—and in that time memory changed. Everyone's memory.

Mistresses, illicit materials, that stock collusion scandal . . . not my Victor, no, never, he wouldn't, it wasn't his way . . . impending investigation for tax fraud, smuggling . . .

Still, something seemed to be missing in the data. There was a consistency problem she could not quite put her finger on.

Victor and Peter entered the study, both grinning and sweaty. They had been out all day. Chloe looked at them and felt betrayed. Peter had been laughing with him. Buddies. But Victor never wanted her to go with him.

They saw her and stopped just inside the doors.

"Chloe . . . ?" Peter started.

"Have a good time?" she asked.

"Yes," Victor said. "I'd forgotten how funny Peter could be."

"A riot," Chloe said.

Peter frowned.

"Yes," Victor said. "Quite a riot. We should have done this sooner. My memory isn't what it used to be." He chuckled.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh?" Chloe said. "Is that the problem then? You've forgotten what it's like to love me?"

"I do love you."

"You have a damn peculiar way of showing it."

"Honesty is peculiar. Hmm."

"Honesty? Seems you were never honest before, why start now?"

Peter looked like she had just slapped him.

"You're confusing things," Victor said. "Me with *him*."

Chloe felt herself shaking. She wanted to argue, wanted to tell him how wrong he was, but she did not know how. She looked at Peter for support, but he stood near the door with his hands in his pockets and an embarrassed, worried expression.

"It might help," she finally said, slowly, "if you would come with me to my analyst." She felt silly. That was not what she wanted to say. She was unsure she *did* want him there.

Victor shook his head. "Wouldn't do any good."

"How do you *know?* You can't know until you try. It might help both of us."

"Not me. Wouldn't work." He sighed. "I wish you'd make up your mind what you want."

"What *I* want? Damn you, you know what I want!"

He looked interested. "Do I?"

"Yes! I want *Victor!* The way I remember him! Laughing, gentle, *alive!* It's you that doesn't know what *you* want! Ever since I brought you home I've been trying to figure that out."

Victor's face clouded. "Can't give you that. I'm just a bad copy."

"That's not what I paid for."

"You paid for something that's dead. What you bought is a slave."

She was shaking. "You—are—the—most—insensitive—"

He glared at her. "*The* most? Really?" He looked at Peter. "I guess you're right. People see what they want to see." He walked out of the room.

Peter did not want to look at her. She stared at him until he did.

"I read your data," she said.

Peter pursed his lips.

"There's a lot there I find difficult to believe."

Peter shrugged. "Your choice. A good deal of it is stuff you might never have found out if you hadn't been obsessed with Victor."

"He was my husband . . ."

"And you loved him very much. But he's gone. The wonder of being human is our ability to change, adapt. You denied yourself that chance by trying to buy Victor back."

"Don't lecture me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Somebody has to. Most people deny death, Chloe, even while accepting it as inevitable and a part of life. You . . . embraced it." He shook his head. For a moment it seemed he had more to say. Then he turned and headed for the door.

"Peter."

He stopped.

"You're sure you're not just angry that I didn't embrace you instead?"

The look he gave her frightened her. He did not answer, only opened the door and left.

Chloe let out a shaky breath.

She drank steadily the rest of the evening. The brandy felt like a living thing after awhile, warm and possessive. She wandered the house. There were far too many rooms. Victor had built compulsively. She had liked it, once, likening it to old English manses with hundreds of rooms wherein dozens and dozens of guests could stay and countless liaisons occurred. She was glad she had put it to an end.

She entered a room she had not been in for some time. Through the drunken haze and the darkness it looked like a store room of some kind. She stood in the doorway for awhile until she made sense of the cabinets and cases: Victor's firearms collection. Another of his compulsions. There were racks of rifles of all sorts from all ages, antiques and modern types, cases full of pistols and accessories. A museum.

The whole house was a museum in a way.

A museum full of old, dead things . . .

The thought sobered her for a moment. She found herself concentrating on the shape of a large-calibre handgun in the case upon which she leaned. *Might be an easy solution*, she thought.

Then: *To what?*

She pushed away from the case and staggered into the door, catching it edge on. She faded out for a moment, came to sitting on the floor. Her right eyebrow ached. Groggily, she got to her feet and felt her way out of the room. She did not remember reaching her room.

She woke up with a headache. In her bathroom she saw the bluish swelling around her right eye and winced. Her stomach was tight and threatening.

She felt different. She stood in the center of her bedroom and slowly surveyed everything. Something *felt* out of place, changed, but she could not pin it down. Chloe shrugged and decided she needed breakfast.

Victor had not come to bed last night. To be expected, she thought. She had pushed him hard the day before.

Peter had left a note on her com. "I've added what I left out to begin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with. We'll see what happens now, and who wins." Chloe read it over several times, finally giving up—it made less and less sense each time.

Victor was absent during breakfast. She saw Peter leaving, suitcases in hand. She called to him but he would not talk to her. It was hard to tell from a distance, but his jaw seemed set in an effort to hold things in.

Chloe grew worried then. She paged Victor. When he did not answer, she became frightened. For an instant she considered calling Peter—he had a car phone, if she pleaded he would come back—then instead began searching the house.

She started with his room, a few doors away from hers. Four large suitcases stood packed and ready by the door.

Room by room, accompanied by an eerie déjà vu that she knew was because of last night's drunken exploration, she went through the mansion, cursing its immensity as panic rose. Could he have left without telling her? No, that was unlike Victor.

She stopped. That was wrong. It was unlike Victor, impossible for the resurrect; he was hardwired. Chloe frowned, not sure how that realization was important, but knowing it was everything.

She ran, then, not sure what other capacities were hardwired into the resurrect—no, the *reconstruct*, damnit—that Victor may have possessed and never told her. She called out. Her voice never seemed loud enough. She was scared now, terrified, flashing on how she had felt when Victor died.

Chloe opened the door to the book museum. She stood there staring at the far wall. Victor looked up. He was standing before an open briefcase on a table, holding an open book he had been studying.

Chloe's heart felt like an animal beating to get out of its cage. She forced herself to close the door quietly and walk calmly across the room. She stopped before him, looked at the briefcase half-full of books, then at him.

He raised his eyebrows, then frowned. "What happened to your eye?"

"I had an argument with myself. I lost."

"Hm. I know how that feels. I go through that every day." He sighed. "But no more." He turned and put the book in the briefcase, went to another shelf and took two more, added them. He snapped the lid closed.

"I noticed that you're packed. Vacation?"

"In a way. In another way, I've been on vacation, ever since you brought me here. I suppose you could say that I'm going back to where I belong."

"I thought you belonged here."

He shrugged and picked up the briefcase.

"How—how do you feel about me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm not sure. I suppose I should feel grateful, but I resent you. A lot."

She shook her head. "I—love you."

"No. You love *Victor*. The dead one."

"But you're just like him . . ."

"Now I am. Peter and I had an interesting session last night. Seems that he had attempted to alter what Victor was through my programs. Seems there were some facets of Victor that made him uncomfortable." He grinned nastily. "You aren't the only one who can't accept reality. In a way I have the advantage over both of you."

"I don't understand."

Victor sighed and shook his head. He looked genuinely sympathetic. "Reconstructs aren't the only ones with hardwiring. There are some things about humans that are undeniable . . . irresistable . . . unalterable. But humans have a facility for self-deception that we poor analogs just can't match." He reached out and touched Chloe's face, lightly. "I'm not angry with you anymore. You can't change who you are anymore than I can change who I am. Anymore than Peter can change who he is. Or how he and I feel about each other."

"Peter . . . ?"

Victor walked past her, toward the door, briefcase in hand. "He knows quite a lot about trying to change hardwiring. He went through the whole gamut. Even had the chance to tinker with the world around him, thinking that changing the externals would make a difference. Ah, well. Honesty is the best, et cetera."

Chloe spun around. "Victor—he wanted *me!*"

He laughed softly. "He frankly didn't know what he wanted. I suspect that's what killed him. But I know what he wanted."

"Peter?"

Victor raised an eyebrow.

Chloe blinked. "And . . . you want him?"

Victor laughed again. He opened the door and walked out. Chloe could hear his laughter all the way down the hallway.

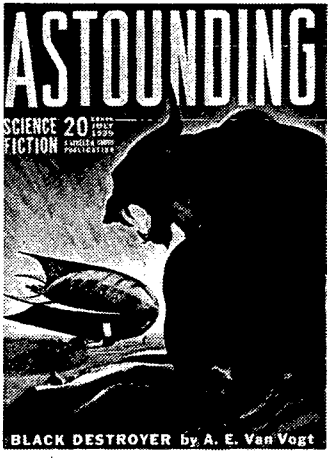
Chloe did not move for a long time. When she felt certain that no one was left in the house, she left the room. She stopped at the door to her museum and glanced in. On the mantle her ivory bust was alone. ●

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *Asimov's* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A TREASURE FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION!

A Hardbound Copy of the July 1939 Edition of ASTOUNDING!



Critics mark this issue as the first "great" issue edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. It contains the first published story, "Black Destroyer," by A.E. van Vogt and the first story by Isaac Asimov to be published in **ASTOUNDING.**

This hardbound facsimile of the July 1939 issue also contains an Epilogue in which A.E. van Vogt, Asimov, and Rocklynne comment on their own work, their feelings towards **ASTOUNDING**, and especially their relationships with John W. Campbell, Jr.

This classic collector's item is now only **$9.95** but act fast, supply is limited. Please send my 1939 **ASTOUNDING** to:

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Send check or money order (No COD's) to: Analog, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462
Canadian or **Foreign** orders add **$5.00.** Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.

MMAA-5

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SECOND CHANCE

Mary Rosenblum

Of her latest tale for *Asimov's* Mary Rosenblum says, "this is a story that was shaped by its milieu. Some very strong themes occur over and over in the accounts given by Antarctic visitors: light, loneliness, and a sense of community, to name a few. This story grew out of those themes and now I find that I am left with a serious desire to actually go there. I think that it's as close to a truly alien world as we can get, for now."

art: Bob Walters

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Something was wrong at Marsbase Down.

Reba peered through the thick glass as the pilot swung them out across the Ross ice shelf. An accident, Scutino had said. They needed a doctor, pronto. Hard white light swallowed the ugly sprawl of MacMurdo base as the helo bounced in the wind.

Hēelo, not chopper. Not down here. Antarctica enforced its own language: ice blink sky, helo, brash ice, and bergy bits. Cold trickled down Reba's collar. Suddenly, there was nothing beyond the thick glass except white. Snow raced through the air in straight lines like a hail of bullets, obscuring the coast of Victoria Land.

Antarctica enforced its own rules. Planes crashed, men and women dropped through the ice with their dozers and trackmasters. Antarctica didn't give second chances.

White sky, white ice. The engine roared and the wind roared. Reba's shoulder banged the thick glass of the window as the helo lurched and bucked. Li had believed in second chances, but Reba had always known better. She gasped as the helo dropped out from under her. The straps jerked her downward with her seat, but her stomach remained behind, somewhere above her. She swallowed, cotton-mouthed. She was damned if she was going to lose it in front of this Navy kid. The helo bucked again, bounced like a ball by the wind.

How many planes and helos littered the ice with their steel bones? Reba stared into the whiteness, feeling nothing but a numb sort of peace. If you stayed down here long enough, the cold arid wind sucked you dry. Memories and emotions blew away like dead leaves.

Outside, the white land had turned brown, as if an invisible hand had peeled the icy skin back from the stony ribs of the continent. The ground was a jumble of black basalt, dolerite, and granite, streaked with brown, gold, and gray, carved into fantastic ripples and curls by the howling wind.

These were the dry valleys, shielded from the snow for a thousand years by a trick of the winds. Marsbase was rising up to meet her, looking like a bunch of pop cans left carelessly on the dry floor of Wright Valley. The helo bounced down, skipped sideways in the wind.

"Easy down," yelled the pilot. "Six inches to your toes."

The rotors had slowed to a rumbling *wheep-wheep* as the kid reached back to open the door. Reba had already shoved it open, admitting a blast of frigid air.

"Nothin' scares you, does it, Dr. Scott?" The pilot's hazel eyes glinted as he grinned at her and his breath misted in the air.

He looked nineteen—twenty, tops. "*You* were driving, weren't you?" Reba gave him a thin smile as she swung down with her pack.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The cold hit her, hard and alien as vacuum. Her nostrils stung. There was no smell to Antarctic wind, only cold. Nothing but cold.

"Dr. Scott." A helmeted, silvery figure waved. The voice sounded tinny—and artificial, blaring from the speaker grid on the chest of his suit. "I'm Commander Ganfield."

Behind Reba, the helo's rotors thundered, drowning his words. Reba looked over her shoulder in astonishment. "He's heading back in *this?*" she shouted.

"The weather at MacMurdo isn't that bad yet."

He sounded defensive. Or was that just distortion from the suit's speaker? Reba pressed her lips together, saying a small prayer that the Navy kid made it back. The wind whipped stinging sand and ice crystals into her face. Reba shouldered her pack, ignoring the Commander's offer of assistance, and followed him back across the dry, rocky ground.

They stopped in front of a round door jutting from one of the base's connected tubes. Reba watched the door iris smoothly open. Pretty neat trick to move at all, in this cold. She felt mildly impressed. Inside, orange and yellow suits hung on the walls of a small room like shed skins. The door irised closed behind them, cutting off the wind's howl. "So what happened?" Reba pulled off her bearpaw mittens and threw back her hood, ears ringing in the quiet.

"There was an icefall," Ganfield said tightly. "We lost three crewmembers in all—including both our medical people."

Reba blinked as Commander Ganfield lifted off his helmet. The tinted glass and his faintly New York accent hadn't suggested the stark, African profile that the helmet had concealed.

"I'm sorry," she said, but she felt little shock. The only coin Antarctica accepted was life. "Dr. Scutino couldn't tell me much." He'd been almost . . . evasive. Reba stripped off her balaclava mask, and combed her fingers through her short, gray hair. "How bad are the injuries?"

"We've got a severe case of frostbite." Ganfield looked at her from the corners of his eyes.

"Frostbite?" Reba stared at him, her mask dangling from her fingers. "Why the hell didn't you send him back to MacMurdo?" Outrage pulled her voice up half an octave. "I'm the only doctor at the base until Brenner gets back."

"I couldn't send *her* off the base." Ganfield's voice was flat and final. "Why don't you come take a look at Sara and we can discuss the whys later?"

Another self-centered NASA prick. Reba pressed her lips together. The airlock and the pressure suits made her uncomfortable. They gave the scene an eerie, alien quality, as if this *was* Mars and not just a training simulation. "Show me my patient," she snapped.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She followed the commander's brisk stride down the tunnel-like corridor. Storage lockers and numbered doors lined the pastel yellow walls. The occasional narrow port had been screened with black to dim the numbing Antarctic light. It seeped in anyway, prying through tiny holes and tears, harsh and irritating. This base's sibling was already swinging toward a landing on the cold, dead soil of Isidis Planitia.

Reba shivered, found herself breathing quickly, as if the warm air was too thin. The base reminded Reba of her one visit to Robert Scott's old ice tunnels. The abandoned living spaces had been frightening, squashed and warped by the slow weight of the ice. Here, it was the weight of technology that pressed in on Reba.

The infirmary looked familiar and reassuring. It was tiny, crammed with lockers and neatly bracketed equipment. An X-ray machine jutted from the wall at one end of the narrow exam table that could double for surgery. State of the art, Reba thought sourly, not like her haphazard clinic. In the dark, stormy winter, MacMurdo was as far from Christchurch airfield as Mars, but Antarctica was just another place on Earth. Mars was an alien world. It was all a matter of perspective.

"In here." Commander Ganfield was beckoning her from a doorway. "This is Sara Shen," he murmured as Reba walked past him.

The isolation room was a narrow chamber, with two double bunks on one side, a built-in desk on the other, and a sink/toilet combination at the end. A small, masked port leaked hard light into the room. The woman on the bunk was small. She lay flat on her back, breathing slowly and regularly. Makeshift restraints, fashioned from towels, immobilized her arms and legs. The woman's hands and feet were hidden by tents of fabric.

"Hello, Sara." Ganfield cleared his throat. "Dr. Scott's here from MacMurdo to see you."

"Hi." The word had the flat gloss of sedation.

The woman turned her head on the pillow and Reba felt the air in her lungs congeal. She looked like Li. "Hello, Sara," Reba managed.

Sara's face carried the same blend of Asia and America that Li's had had, and she had the same sturdy build. Li had always joked about being peasant stock. Reba swallowed, struggling to breathe again. She looked like Li had at twenty-two—the year they had moved into the crummy basement apartment together, Reba's second year of med school.

"Are you feeling any pain?" Reba groped for her clinical composure as she lifted the drape from one of the woman's hands.

"No."

Reba nodded. Dead tissue didn't hurt and the woman was obviously heavily sedated. She frowned at the purplish, grossly swollen fingers. Yellowish serum seeped from deep cracks in the backs of Sara's hands,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Reba smelled the telltale sweetish odor of infection. The sloughing tissues had been damaged and bacteria had invaded. Sara's feet were worse. Reba glanced at the woman's slack, dreaming face and jerked her chin at Ganfield.

"Who has been treating this woman?" she snapped when he had followed her into the exam room.

"I have." Ganfield's face was stiff. "We all have some basic medical training."

"Is this your idea of care? Shoot her full of dope and leave her by herself? What's she been doing, walking around?" Reba reined in her anger with an effort. "Why didn't you send her to MacMurdo right away?"

"Orders." Ganfield's face looked hard as carved mahogany. "Yes, she got up. She's been . . . irrational at times." His lips thinned. "I've been staying with her. I only left to meet you."

Something gleamed in his eyes—worry? Worry about Sara or about the Marsbase program? "I want a helo." Reba leaned against the hard edge of the exam table. "The minute the weather breaks, I'm taking her back to MacMurdo."

"You can't." Ganfield crossed his arms. "Marsbase has been closed for security reasons. Dr. Scutino knows."

Closed? Reba stared into his impassive face, her rising anger tumbling the words in her brain. "Bullshit," she managed. "I don't take orders from NASA. I'm a private contractor for the National Science Foundation. . . ." She bit off the rest of her words as Ganfield shook his head.

"It's a matter of national security." He shrugged, looking tired. "Take good care of Sara, please."

"I may be angry at you, but I don't take out my feelings on my patients."

"I didn't think you did."

"National security?" Reba loaded her words with scorn. "So what illegal military stunt have we tried to pull behind the backs of the treaty nations this time?"

"Nothing like that. I'll make sure that one of the crew is always available if you need help," Ganfield said coldly. "Let me know if you need anything."

"I need a helo back to MacMurdo," Reba growled, but he pretended he hadn't heard her.

She glared as he stalked through the door. *Damn* these military games, anyway. Reba took an IV bag of normal saline from one of the lockers. Scowling, she injected an amp of ceftizoxime into the bag. Someone had played fast and loose with the rules, and now Sara was caught in the middle.

Reba inverted the bag to disperse the antibiotic. The infection was probably staph, but it was well established. The broad-spectrum anti-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

biotic was a good start until she could get a culture and sensitivity run. She smoothed the anger from her face as she reentered the isolation room. "I want to start an IV." She hung the bag above the bunk with a reassuring smile.

"OK." Sara's eyelids fluttered. "Dr. Scott, right?" she asked uncertainly.

"That's right." Reba brushed a wisp of black hair back from the woman's face, flinched at her automatic gesture.

Sara, not Li. Li was dead.

"First, I need a quick sample. It won't hurt."

"I don't feel anything." Sara watched listlessly as Reba cracked a sterile culture vial and swabbed the oozing infection in Sara's hands and feet.

Li had died in just such a bed, plugged into the useless IVs, a shriveled, wasted husk. Drop it. Reba bit her lip, thumbed the clamp and watched the antibiotic-laden saline flow down the tube. "A little prick, now . . ." She drew three tubes of blood, inserted a catheter into a forearm vein, plugged in the IV, and taped the tubing into place.

"It hurt while it was thawing, but not now." Sara watched the colorless fluid drip from the bag. "That means the tissue's dead, doesn't it?"

"Some of it, yes." Reba adjusted the slow drip of the fluid, hearing the fear in Sara's voice. "We'll find out how much as we go along."

"Could I have some juice, please?" Sara's voice was dull with the drug and her struggle with fear. She stared at the ceiling.

"Sure." Reba knew that look—had seen it too many times. "Coming up."

The automated lab swallowed the culture vials and blood tubes with a silvery chime, and Reba found a plastic jug of juice in the exam room's refrigerator.

"Apple juice okay?" She slid an arm beneath Sara's head, supporting her so that she could sip comfortably from a straw. "Wait a minute." She put the cup down and released the restraints. "Try not to move around," she told her.

"Thank you. I keep thinking I can use my hands." Sara's voice trembled. "Will you promise me something?" She looked into Reba's face with Li's dark eyes. "Will you tell the truth when I ask questions? That's the only way I can stand it."

Li would have said something like that. Reba felt dizzy. Li had been so competent, so much in control—on the surface. It was only at the end that she had run out of strength.

"I promise," she said softly.

"Thank you." Sara closed her eyes briefly, some of the tension going out of her face. "I'm going to lose my feet and my hands, aren't I?"

"Parts of them, I'm afraid." I promised to tell her the truth. Reba chose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her words carefully. "They're getting some very exciting regeneration with embryonic growth hormone."

"I'll never go to Mars."

It wasn't a question, so Reba didn't answer.

"I wanted so much . . . " Sara swallowed, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. "It really *was* an ice fall that . . . killed Angela and the others . . . *wasn't* it?"

"That's what Commander Ganfield told me."

"I'm glad it wasn't the sphere."

Sphere? Reba looked sharply at Sara, but the woman's eyelids were drooping.

"I dream about it and it scares me," Sara murmured. "Funny, to be scared of something that fell out of space maybe a million years ago. Funny that we found something like that right here on Earth." Her face twitched, as if she was in pain. "It's so ironic," she whispered. "Angela didn't expect to die down here. Now, neither of us will ever walk on Mars." A tear slid down the side of her face. "I dream that I remember the sphere and I'm afraid. . . ."

A sphere from space? Reba felt a chill surprise. So *that* was it. "Don't be afraid." Reba wiped the side of Sara's face gently. "Dreams are just illusions," she murmured. Even the ones that you thought were your future. Even those dreams were illusions.

"I found it, you know." Sara looked at Reba with Li's haunting eyes. "I dreamed about the place it was buried and there it was."

"You're under sedation and reacting to a bad infection right now." Reba made her voice light. "A lot of things will look different in a few hours. I'm going to take you off the sedative."

"Will you open the shade?" Sara moved her head restlessly on the pillow. "I want to look outside."

Reba twitched the dark screen aside, blinking in the harsh flood of light.

"I can almost pretend that we're on Mars," Sara murmured. "It's so alien. I don't belong here."

None of them belonged here. Even the Weddell seals and the penguins clung to the edge of the sea. The frozen empty land glared through the thick glass. Loneliness. Reba shivered. Antarctica was a vast tract of absolute loneliness. She wanted to clutch Sara and huddle against the far wall, cornered by the freezing isolation outside. Reba let the shade fall back into place. You felt that way down here—back to back against the light and cold, forced into a sense of closeness that didn't really exist.

"Will you stay with me?" Sara's voice was husky. "I don't want to be alone."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Li's eyes. Reba swallowed, wishing she had never come, cursing Ganfield and Scutino. "Yes," she said.

Reba puttered around the small spaces of exam room and isolation, watching the harsh, lonely light seep through the screen. A sphere. A sphere that had fallen to Earth had trapped her here with Li's ghost. Reba shivered.

I don't believe in ghosts, she told herself sharply. Sara was no ghost and she wasn't Li, but the dessicated memories hadn't blown away after all. Here, in the warm, protected microcosm of Marsbase, they were rehydrating. For nineteen years, she and Li had shared their lives.

I don't *want* to remember. Reba watched the crew trainees trickle in to visit Sara, singly and in pairs, diffident and full of falsely cheerful words. They knew that Sara was effectively washed out—one less candidate for space on that distant sibling base.

Some would be truly sorry, some would be secretly pleased. Reba watched them come in and leave, young faces, immediate and full of themselves. So sure of life. She felt acutely conscious of her gray hair. It would be sticking out in spikes, dry and brittle from the cold.

She didn't ask them about the sphere. She noticed the sideways looks they gave her, wary and aware. They had had their orders. She pretended to be busy with notes. The trickle of visitors paused; and Sara drifted off to sleep. Asleep, she didn't look so much like Li. Her face was rounder, broader. Reba stretched, feeling the tension-ache in her muscles. She needed to start anticoagulants before Sara threw a clot to her lungs, and she'd have to set up a physical therapy regimen.

"Who are you?"

It was Sara's voice and . . . it wasn't. Reba turned, hiding surprise behind a bland neutrality. "I'm Dr. Scott. From MacMurdo base, remember?" Disorientation?

The drugged glaze was gone from Sara's face. She looked . . . different, as if she'd put on a mask of her own face. Reba frowned. "How are you feeling?" she asked easily.

"Not good." Sara looked at the dangling IV bag. "How long will I have to stay in bed like this?"

"Until the dead tissue has finished sloughing away." Reba swiveled the plastic chair around to face the bed. It was an awkward maneuver in the narrow space, but it gave her time to collect her thoughts. Something seemed wrong—disturbing—as if Sara's face was subtly deformed.

"Weeks." Sara moved restlessly. "That's too long."

"We'll try to keep you entertained." Reba made her voice reassuring, but Sara wasn't asking for reassurance.

"What happens if I *do* get up?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Infection. More damage." She met Sara's cold, evaluating stare. "You've already tried it."

Fear, Reba thought. She isn't afraid. That's what's missing. Sara Shen's face had a hard gloss that reminded Reba of the ice-covered landscape of Antarctica itself. Everyone had fears—fear of the darkness, fears of spiders or thunder. Fear of death.

Not Sara. Its absence glared like white light on ice. That made her insane, or a potential hero. She doesn't look like Li at all now, Reba thought and felt a tiny chill. What the hell is going on? Some kind of major personality disintegration?

Sara raised her head, eyes on the masked port. "As soon as the weather clears, they'll dig it up and fly it out." She was murmuring to herself, as if she'd forgotten Reba's presence.

"They'll dig what up, Sara?"

Sara closed her eyes, pretending sleep or unconsciousness, but her taut facial muscles gave her away. I'm seeing desperation, Reba thought suddenly. She's not afraid, but she's desperate. It was a cold, calculating desperation.

Why?

"Excuse me." A red-headed man appeared in the door. His short-cropped hair was almost the same color as his orange coveralls. "I'm supposed to report to you. I'm Jerry." His eyes looked past Reba to Sara's still form. "How is she?" he asked in a low, hesitant voice.

"As well as can be expected." Reba stood suddenly. "She's trying to sleep," Reba lied. "If she wakes up, keep her quiet and flat. Where can I find Commander Ganfield?"

Jerry blinked at her brusque tone, but told her.

"Thanks." Reba said. It was time for some answers.

"I was going to come by." Ganfield sounded as defensive as he had when she'd protested the helo's departure. "How's Sara?"

"Good question." Reba looked around at the cramped space of the Commander's private quarters. It was cluttered with manuals and sheafs of hardcopy reports. "Why didn't you tell me that Sara was having some kind of mental or emotional crisis?" The port was unshaded and the bright, pitiless light drained the color from everything in the room.

"I mentioned that she had been irrational." Ganfield didn't meet her eyes. "What did she say?"

"She can't stay here," Reba said bluntly. She traced the harsh lines of the Commander's face. He was holding something back. "What the *hell* did you find, and how does it relate to Sara?"

"We found a . . . meteorite."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My God." Reba's voice crackled with anger. "You fall all over meteorites in the Allan Hills!"

"All right. It's an alien artifact." Ganfield's chair scraped loudly as he stood. "Do you understand me? We found a piece of technology that I can't even make a guess at understanding. Is that important enough for you?"

He was shouting. Reba took a half step backward, a prickle of unease creeping down her spine. Technology? Again, the sense of *alienness* assailed her. Spaceships in the frozen dust of Wright Valley? Reba looked out the port, half expecting to see the cold, red sands of Mars.

"We're such fragile beings," Ganfield said softly. He was looking out the port, too, staring at the dun piles of frozen rock and dirt from the subsurface base that the crews were excavating. "Sara found it while she, Allan, and Kelly were on a mapping expedition at the foot of the Meserve Glacier. The ice shelf came down on them just after they reported." The whites of his eyes gleamed as he swiveled to face her. "Angela was on the rescue team. She got careless and brought down more ice."

He was afraid. Reba had seen fear too often to mistake it. She rubbed her eyes, head aching from the hard light. "What are you getting at?" she asked heavily. "Why did you drag me out here when you could have consulted me on Sara's condition over the radio?"

"I want to know what's wrong with Sara." Ganfield folded the screen back across the port, dimming the numbing light. "I want you to tell me."

"I'm not a psychiatrist," Reba said softly. "Sorry."

He didn't say a word as she walked out of the room.

She dismissed the red-headed Jerry when she returned to the infirmary. He wanted to ask her if Sara was going to lose her hands. Reba could see the question in his eyes, but it reminded her too much of Ganfield's hints and she didn't help him. He finally left, taking the question that he was afraid to ask with him.

Sara turned Li's eyes on Reba. They were normal eyes now, full of normal fear, held under tight control.

"Thank you for not leaving me alone," she said. "I don't want to be alone."

"You shouldn't *be* alone." Reba sat down on the plastic chair, feeling tired and out of her depth.

"I've wanted to go to the stars—ever since I can remember. That's all I ever wanted to do." Sara rolled her head restlessly on the pillow. "Now I wish that I'd never joined the program. Why did you come down to this dead land?" She turned fierce eyes on Reba. "Why do you stay?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Everyone asked that question of everyone else, down here. *Why did you come?*

The usual, casual answers died on Reba's lips. "I don't know," she said slowly. "Maybe because it *is* so alien here." Human loneliness and grief were so insignificant, measured against the Antarctic landscape.

"Will you touch me? I can't feel anything—sometimes I think I'm going to float away or just dissolve."

"It's all right," Reba murmured to the fear in Sara's voice. She reached over to stroke the hair back from her face. Amazingly, her fingers didn't tremble.

Hold my hand, Li had pleaded. *Don't let me die, Reba. Please. . . .*

Oh God, why are You doing this to me?

A lanky blonde woman brought in two trays of dinner and offered to stay for the night, if Reba wanted the privacy of the second isolation room. Reba thanked her but refused, not sure why she did so. She coaxed Sara to eat, although she herself wasn't hungry.

"I'm a light sleeper," she told Sara as she spooned up applesauce for her. "You can call me if you need anything—even if you just need some company."

"Thank you." Sara was staring at the splinters of light coming in through the screen. "I don't want any more visitors. They think I'm crazy. You can see it in their eyes."

"They think you're imagining things." Reba sat on the edge of the bunk, careful not to disturb Sara's tented limbs.

"Am I?" Sara murmured. "How did I know where to find the sphere? Why do I think that I remember it?" She shivered. "I have such strange dreams."

"Tell me about them." Reba combed a tangle out of Sara's short hair with her fingers.

"I can't. I . . . just see them. There aren't any words that fit." Sara's voice trembled. "Sometimes, I'm not even sure who I am."

She was fighting the fear hard. "Easy. Take it easy." Reba stroked her forehead. Touch was important in a sensory deprivation case like this, she assured herself, but her fingers wanted to remember Li and that scared her. This wasn't Li. She stood up abruptly. "Call me if you have any dreams."

"I will."

Sara sank into sleep easily, like someone sinking into deep water. Like someone sinking into death. For a moment, Reba was seized with an irrational urge to shake her, yell at her; wake her up.

Stop it. Reba got ready for bed, telling herself that she was tired, if not sleepy. That was the truth. The base pressed its alien walls around her, rubbing the edges of her mind raw. Reba closed her eyes against

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the light from the port, missing darkness with a sudden painful intensity. The sun never set in the hospital either. You were so sure you would get a second chance, Li. It took you such a long, long time to die.

Reba finally fell asleep and dreamed of Li, laughing as she played with their dog, Oso. She threw the ball and Oso brought it back in her mouth, slobbering all over it, as always. Li bent to pick it up. When she straightened, Reba saw that it wasn't Li at all. It was Sara, and her hands were swollen and black with frostbite.

Reba woke up, her face wet with tears. She hadn't dreamed about Li in a long time. The room was full of dim light from the port and her ears rang with the echo of Oso's frenzied barking. Reba groped for her digital clock, remembering belatedly that she was in an isolation bed in Marsbase.

Her watch said three-ten. She lifted her head to check on Sara and froze. Sara was sitting on the edge of her bunk. The disconnected IV tube leaked fluid onto the sheet.

"What are you doing?" Reba swung her feet over the side of her own bunk.

"Go back to sleep." Sara looked over her shoulder. "No one will ever know you woke up."

Those desperate eyes again. *"I'd* know." Reba stood. "You can't walk." She kept her voice calm and reasonable. "If you put any weight on your feet, you're going to do a lot of damage." She edged closer. "Just lie down," she soothed, sweating.

"Let me *go,* damn it!" Sara lunged forward.

She cried out hoarsely as Reba caught her around the chest, struggling briefly as Reba forced her back onto the bed. Her hands and feet were so much useless weight. With a strangled sob, she went limp, letting Reba ease her back onto the mattress.

"Easy now. That's right." Crooning softly, panting a little, Reba refastened the towel restraints. Close call, very close. She felt shaken as she untangled the sheets and sat down on the edge of the bunk. "Where were you going?" she asked as gently as she could.

Sara looked up at her with bleak eyes. "What if I told you that I'm in prison? That I've been a prisoner for longer than you could imagine and that the gate is out there? It's just out of reach."

They were desperate eyes, but they were cold. Utterly without fear. "I don't know what to say." Reba shivered as if the port had just dissolved, admitting the freezing wind. "Why do you think you're in prison?" I'm no psychiatrist, damn it. Reba took another IV bag from the locker, trying to think. Multiple personality? Paranoid delusions? She'd looked at Sara's health record. NASA psychologists had been breathing down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her neck for years. She wouldn't have made it this far if there had been any hint of instability.

She didn't look like Li at all.

She didn't look like Sara, either.

"Don't play games with me, please." Sara stared up at the ceiling. "I have to reach the . . . sphere."

She had been groping for another word. "You can't go," Reba said gently.

"Not without your help." She looked at Reba briefly, turned her eyes back to the featureless curve of the ceiling. "The Commander wouldn't believe me." She moved restlessly on the narrow bunk. "You can't move physical objects faster than the speed of light, you know. Only the . . . soul can cross the universe. That's how I got here."

Reba stared at her, silent. The walls pressed in around them, and, outside, alien sand lapped at the base. This was the Wright Valley, she told herself sternly. They were a short hop from MacMurdo, a few hours' flight from New Zealand.

"Accidents happen." Sara's voice dropped to a whisper. "Can you even begin to imagine what it would be like to be trapped among alien creatures for a million years? You go crazy, after awhile. You forget who you really are."

Dear God. Reba hung the bag on its hook, feeling tired, old, inadequate to deal with this. The woman's body was tight as a spring. Mechanically, Reba filled a syringe. "This will help you relax," she said.

"Drugs, again? You'll keep me strapped down here until it's gone and I'll never get back." Her voice rose. "How long before I forget forever?" She winced as the needle slipped into her arm, fixing her desperate, fearless eyes on Reba's face. "I thought you'd listen to me," she whispered.

Commander Ganfield came by the infirmary at seven-thirty. "How's Sara doing?" He looked as if he hadn't slept, either. "I'm sorry to bother you so early." He looked at Reba's face and frowned. "Will you come have breakfast with me?" he asked quietly.

She needed to get away from the infirmary. Anywhere would do. "Let me check on Sara." Reba looked into the isolation cubicle. Sara's face was still turned to the wall. "I want someone to stay with her while I'm gone," she said, feeling fatigue like a core of ice in her bones.

"I'll call someone," Ganfield said.

The lanky woman who had delivered dinner arrived, and Reba instructed her not to leave the infirmary for any reason. Ganfield led her down the connecting tunnels of the base, past the small common room. Voices and the smell of coffee wafted through the door.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Suddenly, Reba wanted a cup of coffee more than anything in the world.

"We'll eat in my quarters, if you don't mind." Ganfield sounded hesitant, as if he expected her to refuse.

Official isolation? Reba nodded, too tired to argue. She didn't want to talk about Sara's delusions in front of a crowd, anyway.

The cramped room looked unfamiliar this morning. Had it only been a few hours ago that she was here? Reba rubbed her eyes as Ganfield poured coffee from a thermal carafe. Her eyelids felt puffy from lack of sleep. She picked up her mug and sipped, welcoming the scalding heat.

"What happened last night?" Ganfield asked carefully. He offered her a plate of small, dense muffins, took one himself.

"What makes you think something happened?" Reba snapped.

"Your face." Ganfield leaned forward, his untouched coffee steaming in front of him.

"Sara tried to get out of bed." Reba crumbled her muffin between her fingers. "She became . . . upset. I'm no psychiatrist, damn it. Why do you want me to paste a label on her?" Tired as she was, she was losing her hold on her temper. "What the hell are you trying to cover up?" she snarled.

Ganfield flinched and his face tightened. "Maybe I deserve that." He looked down at his coffee, as if some kind of answer might be floating on the surface. "Angela and Sara were close. Too close, maybe. I shouldn't have let Angela go out on the rescue party," he said quietly. "I knew better." His voice shook.

Reba studied the harsh lines of his profile, her anger dying as suddenly as it had risen. He had made a mistake and Angela had paid for it. Had she been too frantic for a friend's safety to be cautious?

You didn't get second chances, down here.

Reba frowned down at the untidy pile of crumbs in front of her. There were no pictures, few personal mementos at all in the cramped room. What did Mars mean to him? "I'd better get back." She stood.

"Do you have any idea what's troubling Sara?"

"No." Reba looked down into his drawn, guiltstricken face. "No, I don't."

"I've been dreaming," Sara said when Reba returned to the infirmary. "I dreamed I got up and walked in the snow. My nose itches."

Reba scratched it for her. Sara's eyes were Li's eyes again.

"Did I get up?" Sara lifted her head to look down the sheeted mound of her body. "I can't, can I? God, the dreams are getting worse." Her words were slurred with tears and she let her head drop back on the pillows.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You didn't get up." Reba sat beside the bed, feeling cold inside. "It's all right, Sara." The words sounded so false, so useless and inane.

"I don't think it's all right. Nothing has been all right since I found that . . . thing. I keep thinking that I know what it is—that I've been looking for it all my life, but now that I've found it, I'm going to die."

"Stop it!"

Sara turned startled eyes on Reba.

"You're injured." Reba drew a long breath. "You're lying there wondering how crippled you are going to be—whether you realize it or not. You're blaming yourself for Angela's death," she said brutally. "You're in a state of borderline sensory deprivation and I've shot you full of drugs to keep you quiet. You're lucky you can tell up from down, right now."

Tears glistened at the corners of Sara's eyes. "I hope you're right," she whispered. "I wanted to go to the stars so much. I used to climb onto the roof of our house after my parents were asleep and pick out the constellations. My uncle gave me a telescope for my birthday and . . ." Her face went pale.

"What is it?" Reba leaned closer. "Sara? What's wrong?"

"I can't remember his *name,*" she whispered. "It's gone. I keep trying to remember things and they're *just not there.*"

"It's the drugs." Reba caught Sara's face between her palms, wanting to shake her. "Listen to me, Sara. Look at me. It's all right."

"No, it isn't! My uncle's name, my dog—did I *have* a dog?—sixth grade —they're all gone forever. Forever."

I can't remember, Li had cried at the end. She had clung to Reba, as if Reba could save her. *Help me,* she had pleaded.

"Help me," Sara whispered. "Please."

"I will." Reba leaned across the bed, wrapping her arms around Sara. "I'll help you," she murmured to Li's terrified eyes. "I promise." The words caught in her throat. Oh God, I can't take this. Not *again.*

Slowly, Sara's trembling eased and her breathing deepened. Reba felt the change and straightened slowly, dread gathering in her chest.

"It's hard to fight the drugs. I get lost." The fearless eyes looked weary and full of pain. "Have they taken it away yet?"

"No. Stop it," Reba whispered.

She'll end up in therapy, she told herself. Some psychiatrist will unravel all the loose ends you can't see, and, eventually, she'll be whole again. Don't let yourself get dragged into this. You're losing your objectivity. Reba closed her eyes briefly. No, she had lost it already—when she had first looked at Sara Shen and seen Li's face. Just keep her in bed and get the hell *out* of here as fast as you can, she told herself fiercely.

Reba opened her eyes. "Why do you want this . . . sphere?" Her voiced grated like gravel.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's the pattern. It's escape." Her black eyes burned. "I thought it was lost, but it wasn't. All this time, all these centuries, all these lives, these bodies and minds, it's been right here. I think I felt it a long time ago, but I'd forgotten how to understand. You have to let me go. Please. . . ."

Reba started to put a hand on her shoulder, but her fingers flinched away on their own. I can't think of her as Sara, Reba thought with a touch of panic. I have to tell Ganfield that I'm too involved. Someone else has to deal with her. "What will happen if you reach the sphere?" she heard herself asking.

"I'll know the way back." She was panting, flushed and sweaty. "I'll remember how to be free."

"What will happen to Sara?" Reba whispered.

"Sara?" The woman on the bunk frowned up at her. "I . . . am Sara."

Reba shook her head, unable to put her question into words.

"I was born in this body." Her voice trembled. "How else can you understand another race, except to *be* it for awhile? You want to think that I'm insane." Her laugh was sad. "I *am* insane. I've lived here so long, for so many lifetimes, in so many forms, that *I* got lost a long time ago. I forgot who I was. But there is only me, and now I'm starting to remember." Her eyes sought Reba's. "I am the only . . . soul in this body."

"You are Sara Elaine Shen, born of Eloise Gilbert and Cheng Shen in Columbus, Ohio," Reba said harshly. "You are suffering some kind of psychotic break. That's all." She got unsteadily to her feet.

"You believe me. Part of you does." Sara lay still, her eyes on Reba's face. "Do you have any idea of what it's like? To be utterly alone?"

Yes, Reba thought dizzily. Yes, I do. She looked into those black, alien eyes and saw the reflection of her own face, tiny and perfect. "I don't believe you." She stumbled as she crossed the room.

"Don't." She twisted on the bed, watching Reba fill the syringe. "I'm Sara. You'll drown me for awhile, but I'll still be here. I'll still be alone. For how much longer?"

Her voice had the sound of the Antarctic wind, desolate, filled with the echo of empty spaces. Reba jabbed the needle into Sara's arm, suppressing a pang of conscience. I have to have some peace, she told herself. I can't listen to this.

"What if I forget? What if I never find the way back?" Sara's eyes were glazing as the sedative took effect. "Please let me go," she murmured. "I don't want to be alone any more."

Reba summoned the trainee listed on Ganfield's schedule. It turned out to be the red-headed Jerry. "Stay in the room with her," she instructed tightly. "I have to talk to the Commander." He had to let her go back to MacMurdo *now*. Today.

"Sure." Jerry gave her a tentative smile. "Did you hear? The weather

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eased over at MacMurdo. We're supposed to get a couple of helos in here, tomorrow."

It wasn't hard to read between the lines of Jerry's carefully edited report. The experts were on their way, ready to scoop up the precious alien artifact and spirit it away before the treaty nations got wind of it.

After that, it would be over. She would go back to MacMurdo. They'd fly Sara out—back to some military hospital for psychiatric care. Everything would be back to normal in a few days. Or would it? Reba blinked, realizing that she was standing in front of the open infirmary door, staring out into the empty corridor.

She stepped back and the door closed. "I changed my mind. I'm going to get some sleep," she said out loud. "I was up all night."

"Sure." Jerry looked up briefly from his paperback novel.

The empty isolation room had the undefinable unused smell of a new car, but she needed some privacy. Reba closed the door behind her, blinking in the bright light that filled the room.

The Commander didn't believe me Sara had said. But what if he *had?* He was afraid. Afraid of *what?*

My God, am I starting to believe this craziness? The black fabric panel lay on the floor. Either no one had bothered to put it up, or it had fallen down. Reba crossed to the port and looked out, squinting against the light. She could see the tips of the Apocalypse Peaks, like white teeth above the brown desolation of the arid valley floor.

Four years ago, a single graduate student had been studying the wind-erosion of metal in this very spot. Reba remembered the rows of metal stakes he had driven into the rocky ground. He had told her that by comparing his metal stakes to photographs of the legs of the first Mars lander, he could learn about the Martian wind.

This is a piece of alien ground left here by mistake, Reba thought. She had felt it when she first set foot in this place. Perhaps that alien aura had attracted the meteorites that littered the Allan Hills. Perhaps it had attracted the sphere. A few meters beyond the port, she noticed a small drift of dolerite ventifacts. The wind-faceted stones looked like knapped obsidian tools, as if some primitive ancestors of humanity had crouched here, flaking away at the stones, waiting patiently for spring and warmer weather.

But they had died, because spring had never come to this land.

The ancient, black stones reminded her of Sara's eyes. *I am alone.* Reba turned away from the port, away from the harsh white light. Paranoia could sound so rational. She sat on a bunk, hands folded on her lap. Tomorrow, people would come in bright, warm parkas. They would dig the strange thing out of the Meserve glacier and carry it back to their laboratories for scrutiny.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I am alone.

What if it *wasn't* a delusion?

She had seen guilt in Ganfield's eyes. Was it guilt for Angela's death? What remains behind when a soul leaves a body?

The cold comes from within, in Antarctica. It grows in the heart and is pumped to the extremities, until you become a solid, moving sculpture of ice. Reba sat on the bunk, feeling the blood move sluggishly through her veins, colder than the Weddell sea. Outside, she heard someone replace Jerry, to be replaced in turn as the day wore on. Once, she heard Ganfield's voice, but he didn't knock on the door.

It was late before she emerged, although the cold, hard light still poured through the unshaded port. Reba's head ached. A covered tray sat on the exam table in the infirmary. The plastic cover was cold to the touch.

"Did you have a good sleep?" A curly headed young man was sitting in a chair, swinging one foot idly. He nodded toward the door to Sara's room. "Sara said she wanted to rest. I thought you were going to sleep all night." He stood, yawned and stretched his compact frame. "You still need me?" he asked hopefully.

"No. Thanks." Reba waited for him to leave.

Sara didn't look at her. She was staring at the ceiling, her face expressionless. The IV bag was empty. Blood had backed into the plastic catheter tubing.

Sara watched with lackluster eyes as Reba peeled off the tape and removed the catheter. "More drugs?" she asked.

"No." Reba lifted the drapes to examine Sara's hands and feet. It was a gesture, a touchstone of familiarity. She looked at the swollen, dead tissues without really seeing them, took a deep breath. "You won't be able to walk," she said. "I'll have to carry you."

"You'll help me," Sara breathed.

"I think I'm crazy." She didn't look at Sara's face.

"Thank you."

Reba didn't answer.

It was easy. Reba almost hoped that someone would challenge them, but they met no one on their endless journey to the lock. It *was* the middle of the night, after all, in spite of the bright, summer light. You didn't guard equipment, down here. Antarctica itself guarded it for you. Sara was lighter than Reba remembered, as if her flesh was thinning, sloughing invisibly. Reba carried her easily down the corridor and into the lock.

The skinsuits were plainly impossible. Reba worked Sara's dead hands through the sleeves of Reba's own parka, wincing at the damage that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wouldn't matter but still did. The bearpaw mittens nearly defeated her. Sweat stuck Reba's hair to her forehead and she jumped at every sound.

Oh, God. What if I'm wrong?

Reba got a pair of boots on Sara, began to pull on an orange skinsuit. Sara told her how to fasten the seals and activate the heat. The cycling lock sounded like a hurricane in Reba's ears, but still no one appeared to stop them.

Masked ports glared like blind eyes from the silver radiation-reflective skin of the base. The wind shoved at her, but the suit blocked the cold. It was frightening not to feel cold—as if her own flesh was frozen and dead. She boosted Sara's too-light body onto the seat of a parked trackmaster and got it started.

So far, so good. Reba tried to count her own heart rate. Fast. The trackmaster roared and lurched across the rocky slopes. Clumsy in the unfamiliar suit, she felt as if she was driving for the first time.

"That way," Sara shouted, pointing up the valley.

They passed a dead seal at the edge of a black puddle of frozen lake. It was a crab-eater. The drying lips had curled, exposing its yellow teeth and its mottled, gray and yellow sides looked sunken and brittle.

Why did they come here, struggling across a barrier of moraine and broken ice? Antarctica's white light stabbed Reba through the tinted glass of her helmet. Did some mysterious force draw them, too?

Then the trackmaster was climbing. Here cold had cracked the soil into neat polygons. The permafrost was six inches down and six-hundred feet thick. Reba watched the Meserve glacier grow higher in front of them. The pale blue walls cut off the end of the valley. Broken chunks of ice littered the stony ground, light as balsa wood. They glittered in the sun, as if they were flecked with silver.

"Stop," Sara shouted over the roar of the trackmaster.

Reba shut off the engine. You could still go back, she told herself, but she was already clambering down from the seat. Sara was so light. Reba's feet crunched on ice and rock and she struggled to keep her footing on the loose scree. The rescue team had surrounded the site with the bright orange stakes that seemed to define all human intrusions in this land.

She couldn't tell which jumble of ice had killed the trainees. It had been a casual thing, leaving almost no trace on Antarctica's face. Reba stopped. The ice at the foot of the glacier was clear, full of tiny bubbles, as if someone had frozen a bottle of champagne.

There it was.

Right there.

Ganfield was wrong, was her first, numb thought. She had visualized machinery—a flying saucer. But this was no machine.

The tiny sphere glowed in its shroud of ice, shimmering with opalescent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

light. Reba caught her breath. It had no definite shape, although sphere was close enough. *Pattern,* Sara had called it. The small nodule of beautiful light was more alien even than Antarctica's white glare.

As alien as Sara's eyes.

"What happens now?" Reba let Sara slide slowly to the broken ice.

Sara crumpled to her knees without answering. She had shed the last remnants of her humanity like a tattered cloak. Crouched awkwardly on her dead feet, her face was empty, a mirror, reflecting back the shimmering opalescence.

There is only one soul in this body, Sara had said.

Reba had meant to stay, but Sara's face and the beautiful alien light terrified her more than anything she could remember. She ran, stumbling back across the shattered ground, panting, sweating inside her suit. She didn't want to see, didn't want to know, but she looked back when she reached the trackmaster. The air above the glacier seemed to be streaked with a strange, shifting, unearthly light. The *fata morgana?* Another of Antarctica's famous illusions?

"I couldn't save you," Reba whispered to the woman with Li's eyes. The words caught, became a sob. "I wanted to, but I couldn't."

She hadn't been able to save Li, either. Reba watched the shimmering light. Death was stronger, Li. I did all I could. It wasn't my fault. The first tears scalded her as they trickled down her cheeks.

The trackmaster lurched over the cold stones on the way back to Marsbase. The dead seal grinned at her, and Reba met its conspiratorial stare, wondering if she would merely lose her license or if she'd go to prison. The experts in their bright parkas wouldn't find their sphere. They'd only find a frozen, empty body.

What does an interstellar address look like? Or the envelope for a soul? The trackmaster lurched and growled. Steve Ganfield would pay, too, even though he'd been afraid to let Sara go. They'd blame him for the sphere.

No second chances, down here.

Not so. I gave *Sara* a second chance.

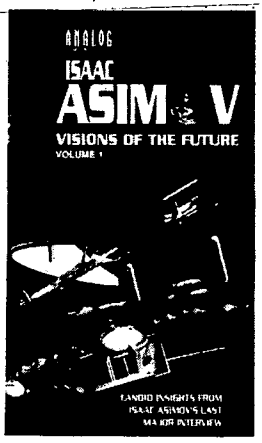
Reba looked back at the blue shadow of the Meserve glacier. Wet with her tears, her face burned like thawing frostbite. Down here, the cold comes from within. Reba clung to the trackmaster as it crunched across the frozen, alien ground.

It was time to go north. Maybe somewhere, she could find the spring. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ANALOG PRESENTS

ISAAC ASIMOV'S VISIONS OF THE FUTURE



LOOK INTO THE FUTURE WITH ONE OF THE GREATEST SCIENCE/ SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The Premier Edition of an important video series, totally original and totally new.

Isaac Asimov's Visions Of The Future- as dynamic and inspiring as science fiction- is presented in this ambitious new video series. Isaac Asimov guided the series development, and in his last major interview, he spoke eloquently about a world being shaped by the work done in today's laboratories and research centers.

- **Robots and Robotics**
- **Genetic Engineering**
- **Nanotechnology**
- **Deep Space Travel**
- **Terraforming Planets**
- **Artificial Intelligence**

Be sure to add this very special video to your collection, and look for the next volume of Analog Presents Isaac Asimov's Visions Of The Future to be released soon.

Order This Collector's Edition Today! Only $19.95 plus $4.95 shipping and handling.

YES! I WANT TO RECEIVE THE PREMIER EDITION OF ISAAC ASIMOV'S VISIONS OF THE FUTURE VIDEO.
Enclosed is my check or money order for $19.95 plus $4.95 shipping and handling.

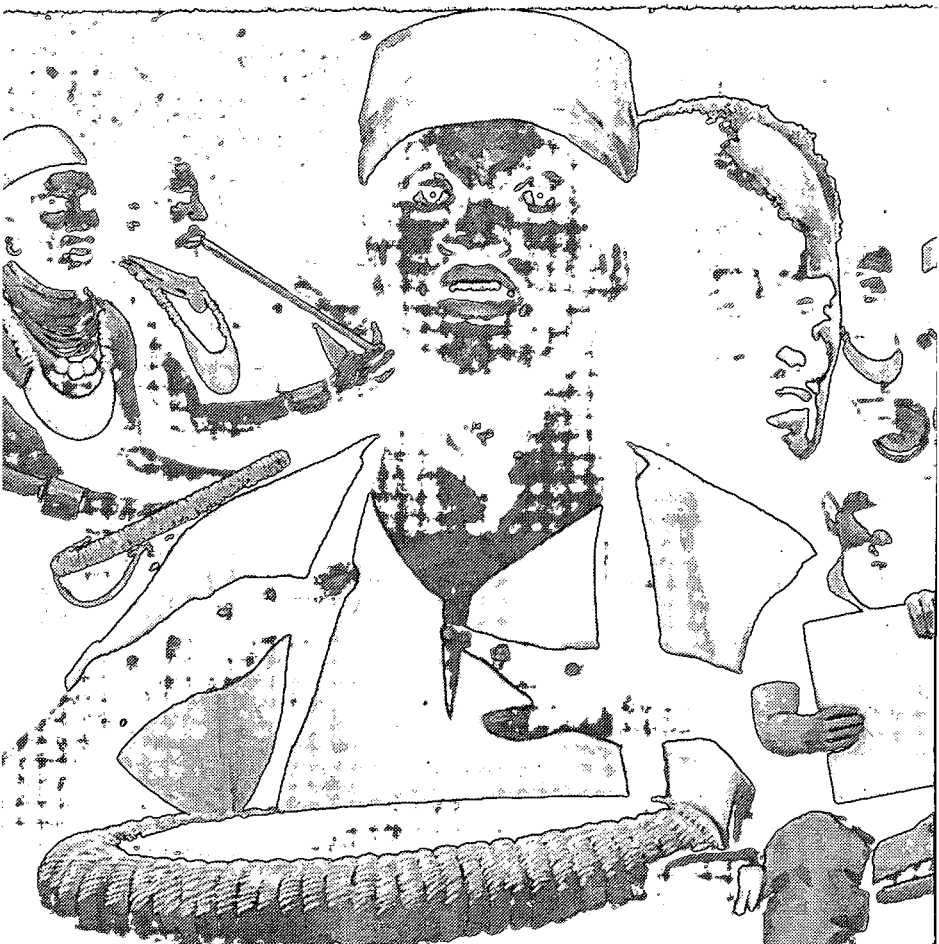
☐ MasterCard ☐ Visa
☐ Check or Money Order
Card #_____
Exp. Date_____
Signature_____
OR CALL: 1-800-486-5347
Ask for Asimov's Vision

Send your order to:
Isaac Asimov's Visions Of The Future
Quality Video Inc.
Pentagon Towers
P.O. Box 36190
Minneapolis, MN 55435-6190

Please send my video to:
Name:_____
Address:_____Apt.:_____
City:_____State:_____Zip:_____

Video available in VHS only. Minnesota residents add 6.5% sales tax. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



THE SOUND OF THE RIVER

by M. Shayne Bell

Africa has always been a place of magic and wonder to M. Shayne Bell. Though his own literary exploration of that continent has taken a markedly different direction, it was the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs which first captivated and inspired him. Lately, the author has been exploring the Anasazi ruins in Utah, and he tells us that some tales are likely to come of that obsession, too. Mr. Bell's publications include short stories and poetry in *Asimov's*, *Amazing*, *F&SF*, and *Pulphouse*.

art: John Johnson

LICENSED TO ZZZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was the physical presence of the Sahara surrounding Niamey, the heat and the dust and the sand of it, that never let anyone in the city forget that Niamey had no water of its own. By the end of my third week there, getting water for drinking, cleaning, and bathing had become an obsession with me, an obsession shared by everyone else. It got so that just before dusk I would stand on the balcony of my third-floor hotel room and watch the road south of town for the dust of the water trucks lumbering up from the coast. Watching from the third floor gave me an advantage. At the first glimpse of dust, I would pull on a shirt and hurry out to Sekondi Usala, a water seller whose friendship I tried to cultivate—and I'd get there before most of the other people.

I preferred buying my water from Akmid Usala. He seemed honest, and once he had even sold me a liter of first-grade drinking water before the sun had set—but only once. "You Americans suffer more in our heat," he told me when he handed me the water, and he hadn't charged extra for the evaporation when he measured it out.

So it happened that on the Friday of my third week in Niamey I caught an early glimpse of the dust of the water trucks south of town and arrived at Sekondi Usala's door before the sun had fully set. I carried two empty three-liter plastic water bottles with me. I wanted to be sure to get water for a weekend bath.

"Go away," the gatekeeper told me in French. "We will not sell water until ten."

"So I will wait here in line," I said. I *was* going to take a bath that night. I hadn't been able to get enough water midweek to take a bath, and I'd tried washing with beer I'd saved from a lunch at the Canadian embassy.

"You will *not* wait here," the gatekeeper said. "Sekondi Usala will not have it."

"I am his American friend," I said. "He will let me wait."

"Indeed, he will not have it," the gatekeeper said. "Sekondi said to me: 'Tell my American friend to wait in the museum. All people not from Niger go to the museum, but he does not go. Tell him to wait there until we sell the water.' And so I have told you."

The gatekeeper would not look at me or talk to me after that. He brushed flies away from his eyes and watched his feet.

So I walked away slowly, back up the street. It was not a good idea to anger one of the major water sellers of Niamey, one who was evidently a Nigerophile proud of his country's past and the museum that preserved some of it—but that I had to be so careful of this man and his hired gatekeeper made *me* angry and made me see how little power I had over the smallest details of my life. Oh, I could leave Niamey any time I chose to, but I chose to stay to try to help Aissa Seibou get funding for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Zermaganda mines project, and that meant I had to be careful of water sellers.

I leaned against the wall of a house two houses down from Sekondi Usala's. The gatekeeper did not look at me. I looked at my watch: 7:30. Two and a half hours till I could buy any water. Other people were standing up and down the street in the lengthening shadows, waiting. None of us in line, of course. Sekondi Usala wouldn't have that.

I looked back at the gatekeeper. He was looking at me, then. "The museum will entertain you until we sell water," he called to me.

Damn, I thought. He would *not* give up. There was nothing to be done except go to the museum, then return and show Sekondi the receipt for my entrance fee and tell him that I had seen this or that interesting thing from his country's past and hope that he'd sell me enough water to keep me from washing in beer.

The museum was two blocks away. I left my empty plastic bottles at the front desk and was careful to keep the receipt for my entrance. The museum had opened only an hour before I arrived. I read in the mimeographed guide I was handed that the directors could afford little electricity, so they opened the doors to the public only in the evenings when the exhibits could be viewed in the waning light of day and air-conditioning could theoretically be dispensed with in most of the building. I walked, sweating, among the exhibits on the first floor, watching shadows gradually cover the stuffed specimens of animals, birds, and fish that had once inhabited the Niger river valley; the Neolithic spear points discovered near Arlit; and the geometric designs painted on wood shields made from trees gone extinct twenty years before.

I walked upstairs to the second floor, the archives, and tried the water fountain at the top of the stairs, but of course it didn't work. Across from the fountain were a series of glass cases exhibiting Dutch engravings made from sketches drawn by the English explorer Mungo Park for his 1797 book *Travels into the Interior of Africa*. I looked in the first case. The engraving I saw was old, yellowed, crumbling at the edges, carefully folded out from the book it was bound in. I could see it dimly in the fading light.

And I had seen it before.

The engraving showed the Niger river and, though stylized, pictured a land more lush than anyone living now in Niger could remember. I remembered seeing that exact engraving as a boy, printed on the jacket of a record I had loved and forgotten, a record of music by a group from Niger. It gave me a strange feeling to see something as a man that had meant so much to me as a boy and, for a time, while standing looking at the engraving, it seemed as if the boy and the man were different people

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who had once been introduced. I wondered what the boy had really been like and why the music had held him so long, moved him so much.

And if, subconsciously, that music had compelled him into a line of work that eventually brought him to stand in a museum in Niamey, the city from which the music had come—even after he had forgotten the music.

I wanted to hear that music again. I wanted to listen to it in Niamey itself and see what the man would make of it, what he would find in it. So I went looking for the director of the archives, François Brissot, an old Frenchman whose family had stayed in Niamey through decades of post-colonial political turmoil and eventual ecological disaster, and brought him back to the engraving in the glass case. He stooped down over the top of it and peered into the growing shadows.

"On a record jacket?" he asked me again, in French.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I owned a copy of that record when I was a boy. The group was—"

"Hamane Oumarou."

"You remember them, too."

"How old are you?"

"Old enough to have owned records. I had two of theirs."

"Well." He straightened up. "There were only six. You did well. We have the Hamane Oumarou papers and what production tapes of the group's were saved from the fire. Follow me, and I will show you."

He talked as we walked down a hall lined with file cabinets. He told me the studio in Paris that recorded Hamane Oumarou had burned, and that the group had rerecorded their music, this time digitally, but disbanded shortly afterward when Hamane Oumarou left his group and returned home from Paris.

Brissot stopped in front of a closed door. "The music is in this room," he said. "I'm afraid there will be a nominal charge to you if we turn on the lights."

"I'll pay it," I said.

He opened the door, turned on the lights, and motioned me ahead of him into a room filled with the music of Niger: anthropological recordings duplicated in Paris and sent down to the Niamey archives, the papers and compositions of eight native composers, and what was left of the work of Hamane Oumarou—one cardboard file box labeled "Correspondence" and another labeled "Recordings, Show Bills, and Contracts." Brissot took five compact discs out of the front of the Recordings box and handed them to me. None had the Mungo Park engraving on its jacket.

"I owned records," I said.

"But we did not collect them, unfortunately," he told me. "We were given these after the fire and the rerecording."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I was afraid I would have to listen to each of the CDs to find my music, and I wasn't sure I would know it then, it had been so long. I had hoped to find my record with the help of the jacket art. But as I looked through the CDs, I recognized one of the jackets, a photo of Bilma from a distance, the spires of its mosques rising up over the walls of the city. "This was on the jacket of the second Hamane Oumarou record I owned," I said.

"Then they probably used the same art on the CD jackets that they had on the records," the director said. "But there were six records. Yes—look here."

He pointed to a list of the recordings of Hamane Oumarou: six records, five of them rerecorded digitally and put out on CDs. The one that had not been rerecorded was their first record, *Niger!*, and I remembered that title. It was the name of the record I had owned that had had the Mungo Park engraving on the jacket.

"Why was this one not rerecorded?" I asked.

"I do not know," the director said. "But would you like to listen to these other CDs?"

I told him that I would, and he left me sitting next to a stereo, earphones on, listening to the CDs in order. It turned out that I had owned the first and second recordings of Hamane Oumarou—the CD with the photo of Bilma on it had been the second, and I remembered the music. Some of it was strangely compelling. Hamane Oumarou himself would sing out a line of a chant about a Hausa king or perhaps a virgin lost in the desert just before her wedding and the other five members of the group would repeat the line with slight variations. The music would grow in intensity and power; drums and the native instruments would be added one by one; and some of the songs would end in a moving crescendo that said "Africa" to me, even now, as I sat in a museum in a city of Africa.

It was what the music had said to me as a boy.

But only some of the music on that second recording could say "Africa." Most of it said New Orleans or Paris—jazz, in other words. Hamane Oumarou had turned the remarkable music of Niger into what, in the end, seemed unremarkable jazz. And the succeeding recordings confirmed me in my feelings. There was less and less of the musical magic and wonder, movement, romance and the exotic, that Hamane and his group had originally brought with them out of Africa, less and less of the magic that had drawn me to some of the music of that second recording and to all of the music of the first—music I wanted to hear again.

Three songs on the Bilma CD spoke of Africa to me. I put that CD back in the stereo and listened to those songs again, just the ones that seemed little affected by a foreign musical idiom. It's not that I don't like jazz. I like good jazz. It just seemed to me that when Hamane Oumarou chose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to adopt jazz, he lost a power in his music that spoke to me even as a boy. I could get jazz anywhere. What I couldn't get was the music of Niger, and that was what I had wanted. There was evidently a reason I had stopped buying Hamane Oumarou records—they had stopped giving me Africa.

Well, I had Africa now, I thought, and it was big and hot and dry—an Africa different from what I had imagined it to be as a boy. I took off my earphones, put the Bilma CD back in its jacket, and stood up to go. I put the CDs back in the Recordings box, and it occurred to me to wonder whether Hamane Oumarou and any of the other members of his group might still be alive and living in Niamey, or even anywhere in Niger. If I could find one of them, I could perhaps discover a way to listen again to the music of that first recording.

I pulled down the box of correspondence and started thumbing through it, looking for the most recent letters and, perhaps, an address. The correspondence was arranged in chronological order; the first letters were from a recording studio in Paris that had heard of Hamane Oumarou and was interested in recording his music. There were letters Hamane had written from Paris to relatives in Niamey, and for years, it seemed, Hamane and his group had lived in Paris, and all of the correspondence went to addresses there. There were letters about the fire and the rerecordings—and then, interestingly enough, letters in which Hamane Oumarou steadfastly refused to consider rerecording *Niger!*, though why was not clear. After those, I found letters sent to Hamane Oumarou, then at an address back in Niger, in the city of Zinder—letters from the other members of Hamane's group asking him to come back to Paris. The letters all seemed hurried and desperate, and it became clear that Hamane was somehow involved in the political upheavals between the fall of the last military dictatorship in Niamey and the going dry of the Niger River.

Then I found a letter of appointment from the king of Zinder: Hamane Oumarou had been court music master. After the fall of the dictatorship, the Hausa had attempted to break away from Niger to form their own kingdom centered around Zinder. I knew that the Hausa movement had been a conservative one, and that the court music would very likely have been the kind of music I loved Hamane Oumarou for, not jazz. I wanted to hear that music—and I wondered what it would be like now, if Hamane Oumarou were indeed still alive. The Hausa kingdom had failed, of course, not so much for lack of battlefield skill, but for lack of water. In the years of civil war, Hamane had received letters in Zinder from Paris—from old friends, royalty payments, and the like. They were all collected here. After the fall of Zinder, the Hausa king had been placed under house arrest in Niamey, and I had reason to believe that Hamane

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oumarou was indeed in Niamey with his king and what was left of his court: the last letters in the collection were sent to Hamane Oumarou at an address in Niamey, and they were from the Hausa king thanking Hamane, among other things, for his efforts to preserve Hausa music—which had evidently been recently recorded under Hamane Oumarou's direction, this time by anthropologists. I had to wonder, again, about Hamane Oumarou's refusal to rerecord *Niger!* He had recorded authentic music again, just a few years before I had come to Niamey. So why not *Niger!* The last letter from the Hausa king was but one year old. I wrote down the address, put back the box of correspondence, turned out the light and left the music room.

On the way out, I stopped to look again at the Mungo Park engraving. I could see little of it now, in the darkness of the museum: only the broadest outlines of a wide river shaded by trees—a verdant past that gave some people hope of bringing about a verdant future. And it seemed that Hamane Oumarou had gone back to the musical beauty of Niger's past to preserve it too for the future, and I liked him for that.

It was after ten when I walked back up to the front desk and paid the charge for using the lights. The girl there handed me my plastic water bottles. I had forgotten my water. In my rekindled interest in the music of Niger I had forgotten my water! I hurried back to Sekondi Usala's. The street around his house was a riot of hundreds of thirsty, sweating people crowding up for water, carrying tubs and buckets and empty bottles and skin bags. Women carried crying babies strapped to their backs, and everyone stomped dust up into the air. I waited in that chaos until eleven and got no water and never saw Sekondi Usala so I could show him the receipt from the museum and let him know that I had gone, and I washed my face in beer that night and before going to bed wrote Hamane Oumarou a letter asking him if I could meet him and talk to him about his music and sent it off to the address the Hausa king had used.

On Monday of the following week, I had a reply. Hamane Oumarou would be pleased to receive me that very night at seven. I read the letter and went into a panic to get clean. Sekondi Usala would not sell water until after sundown, of course. I had made a couple of friends at the Canadian embassy, and one of them took me home with him and gave me a liter of water. I stoppered up his sink and managed to take a sponge bath and even wash my hair and shave. Afterwards, it seemed good to walk down the street not smelling of beer.

I walked to the house of Hamane Oumarou, which was on Yantala Street looking down over a series of dry bluffs into what had been the riverbed of the Niger River before it had gone dry. Hamane Oumarou

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was waiting for me. He was a short, thin man dressed in a white cotton abiyah and sandals. He had very little white hair left on the top of his head. We introduced ourselves and shook hands, and he blessed me in the name of Allah and invited me in. I had to stoop to walk into his house, but the ceilings inside were high. The house was built of stone and was cool, and I wondered if it was money from the Paris recordings that had built it or if it had been money from the Hausa king.

Hamane led me to a small room that looked out over the dry Niger. The room seemed set up just to drink coffee in: it was furnished with two wood chairs, a small wood table, and a stereo with CD player and a turntable along with a microwave coffee service set against the far wall under a cabinet for cups and saucers. On the wall facing the dry Niger were framed reproductions of the Mungo Park engravings I admired—including, in the center, the one that had been on the jacket of *Niger!*

But we could not talk about music then. As a guest, I was required to drink at least three cups of my Muslim host's thick, black coffee and talk about anything but the business at hand, which was music. So we drank coffee and brushed flies away from our eyes and talked in French about water and the getting of it, the massacres in Mali and the growing refugee problem, the success or lack of it of the more humane population-control methods in Niger.

"You will take more coffee?" Hamane asked after I finished my third cup.

"With pleasure," I said, and he filled my cup. This would be the cup I would not finish, I knew.

Hamane filled his own cup, but did not touch it. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in front of him. "You are kind enough to know my music," he said.

I told him about the records I had had as a boy, and he smiled and seemed delighted that a boy in America had had two of his records, and that that boy had loved them.

He told me about his work with the Hausa king, and then he played his copies of the anthropologists' recordings of his court music. I listened until the sun had set and Hamane had lit candles in the walls. The music was all I had hoped for: the repeated chants I remembered, growing in complexity and rhythm and movement till I could hardly stop myself from joining in, but I smiled and Hamane smiled with me to see my obvious joy in the Hausa music.

"There are many tapes," he said, finally. "I will ask you back to hear them all."

"And I will gladly come," I said. If his music had subconsciously influenced me to work in Africa, it was an influence I gladly accepted and acknowledged.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He stood to put his tapes back in their cases, and I looked beyond him at the engravings on the wall, flickering in the candlelight. I thought again of the record *Niger!*

"May I ask you one question before I go?" I asked.

"Of course," Hamane said.

"Why did you not rerecord *Niger!*?"

He put down his tapes and looked at me. "Was it that music that you were trying to find again in the museum?" he asked me.

I nodded

"It was like the music you heard and loved tonight."

"Yes, it was," I said.

"Wait here. I will find my copy of *Niger!* and play it for you," he said.

"I don't mean to impose—"

He held up his hand. "It is the only way for me to answer your question. When you hear the music again, you will understand why I could not rerecord it."

He crossed to the windows and opened them wide. "While I am gone to get the record, listen to what you can hear out of these windows," he said, and he left the room.

I listened and could hear a truck on a road back in Niamey. I heard a dog barking south of us, in the Gaoueye district. I heard the wind blow along the dry course of the Niger.

Hamane returned with his record. He handed me the jacket after he took the record out and put it on the turntable: the Mungo Park engraving was as I remembered it, and I felt again like a boy, except that now I was with the man who had made the music I loved.

He put the needle down, and the music started, scratchy. "What do you hear?" he asked me, right away.

"Your voice," I said. "A drum."

"What else?"

I listened. "Another voice."

"What else?"

I listened, but could hear only the two voices and drums.

"What do you hear behind the music?"

Then I realized. "Water?" I asked.

He picked up the needle and put it back down in another song. "What do you hear now?" he asked.

This time I was listening for the water, and I heard it in the background. "Water again," I said.

"What here?" he asked, putting the needle in a different place.

"Water."

"And here?"

"Water."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He let the music play after that, but walked to the windows and looked out. "The water you hear," he said, "was the water of the Niger River."

We were both quiet for a time, and I listened now, not so much to the music, as to the sound of the water behind it.

"We taped hours of the sound of the river and dubbed it on a track behind our music when we recorded it in Paris," Hamane said. "We wanted the river with us in our music when we began because the river was our country. Those tapes of the river were lost in the fire, too."

And I understood. "You could have reproduced the music," I said, "but not the sound of the river."

He did not look at me. "What did you hear out of these windows when I left you here to listen?" he asked.

I told him what I had heard. He turned off his music and had me stand at the windows with him, looking out at the dry Niger. We listened to the wind in the riverbed till the candles guttered down and one had gone out. Hamane Oumarou led me to his door then, and I walked back to my hot rooms that had no running water. I had three beers hidden under my bed, and I drank one of them alone in my room, then took off my clothes and lay down on my bed, but my windows were open and the wind made the windows rattle and I could not sleep for a very long time. All the sounds that night were harsh and dry. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(From page 89)

with a wry but fast-paced tale of conflict and intrigue on the Moon, as the crew of a routine "Supply Run" find themselves in the midst of an unexpected and deadly emergency; **Bruce Bethke,** making an exciting *Asimov's* debut, joins forces with the prolific **Phillip C. Jennings,** one of our most frequent contributors, to spin the weird and wonderful story of "The Death of the Master Cannoneer"; **Steve Carper** makes a moving and evocative *Asimov's* debut with a study of what it feels like to be "Wrestling with the Demon"; popular fantasist **Charles de Lint** returns with a story of the hidden worlds of enchantment that lie *behind* mundane reality, in "The Stone Drum"; and new writer **Jeff VanderMeer** makes an offbeat *Asimov's* debut, bringing us the strange and bittersweet story of a "Mahout" who finds himself stranded far, far from anywhere that he could call home. Plus an array of columns and features.

Our evocative cover is by **Michael Carroll,** and our jampacked Mid-December issue goes on sale on your newsstands on November 10, 1992.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

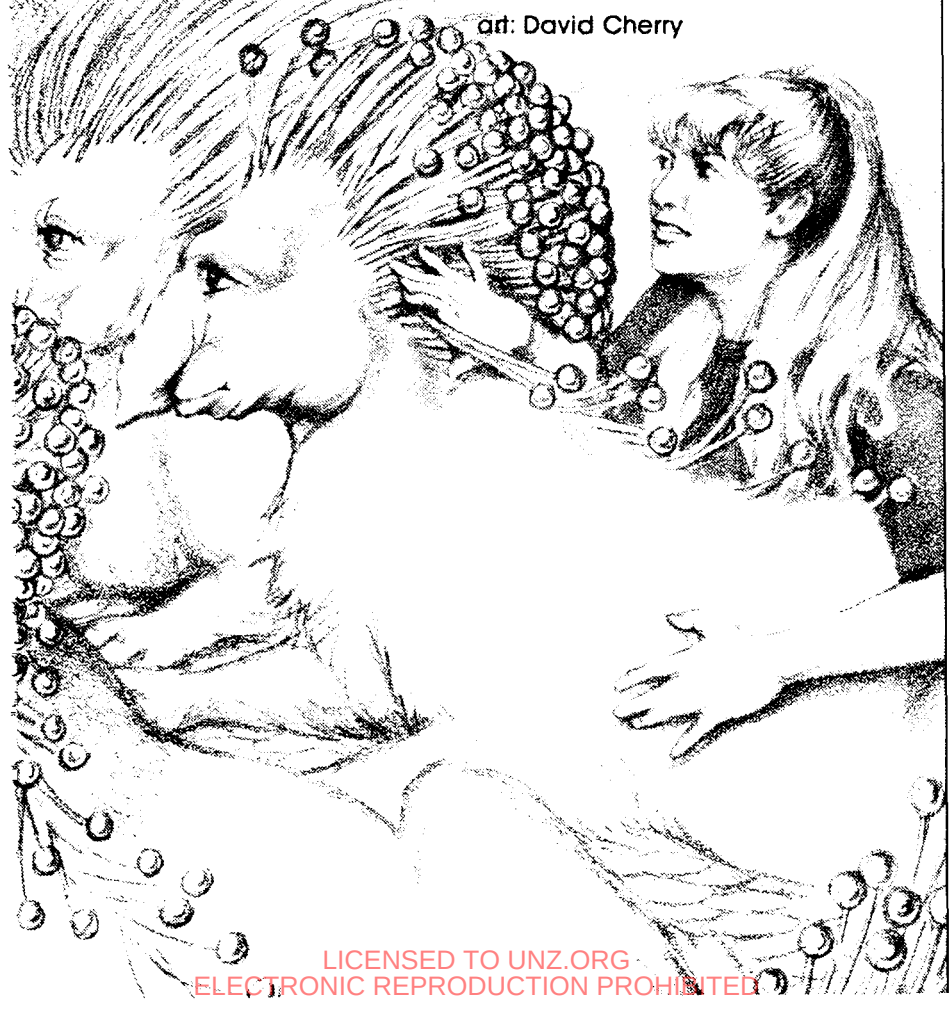
LICENSED TO INZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE NUTCRACKER COUP

Janet Kagan

Janet Kagan's Christmas tale of "The Nutcracker Coup" is a delightful mix of human traditions and unforgettable aliens. Ms. Kagan has a story appearing in *Unicorns II*—an Ace anthology edited by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois—and her novel, *Mirabile*, is now available from Tor in paperback.

art: David Cherry



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marianne Tedesco had "The Nutcracker Suite" turned up full blast for inspiration, and as she whittled she now and then raised her knife to conduct Tchaikovsky. That was what she was doing when one of the locals poked his delicate snout around the corner of the door to her office. She nudged the sound down to a whisper in the background and beckoned him in.

It was Tatep, of course. After almost a year on Rejoicing (that was the literal translation of the world's name), she still had a bit of trouble recognizing the Rejoicers by snout alone, but the three white quills in Tatep's ruff had made him the first real "individual" to her. Helluva thing for a junior diplomat *not* to be able to tell one local from another—but there it was. Marianne was desperately trying to learn the snout shapes that distinguished the Rejoicers to each other.

"Good morning, Tatep. What can I do for you?"

"Share?" said Tatep.

"Of course. Shall I turn the music off?" Marianne knew that *The Nutcracker Suite* was as alien to him as the rattling and scraping of his music was to her. She was beginning to like pieces here and there of the Rejoicer style, but she didn't know if Tatep felt the same way about Tchaikovsky.

"Please, leave it on," he said. "You've played it every day this week—am I right? And now I find you waving your knife to the beat. Will you share the reason?"

She *had* played it every day this week, she realized. "I'll try to explain. It's a little silly, really, and it shouldn't be taken as characteristic of human. Just as characteristic of Marianne."

"Understood." He climbed the stepstool she'd cobbled together her first month on Rejoicing and settled himself on his haunches comfortably to listen. At rest, the wicked quills adorning his ruff and tail seemed just that: adornments. By local standards, Tatep was a handsome male.

He was also a quadruped, and human chairs weren't the least bit of use to him. The stepstool let him lounge on its broad upper platform or sit upright on the step below that—in either case, it put a Rejoicer eye to eye with Marianne. This had been so successful an innovation in the embassy that they had hired a local artisan to make several for each office. Chornian's stepstools were a more elaborate affair, but Chornian himself had refused to make one to replace "the very first." A fine sense of tradition, these Rejoicers.

That was, of course, the best way to explain the Tchaikovsky. "Have you noticed, Tatep, that the further away from home you go, the more important it becomes to keep traditions?"

"Yes," he said. He drew a small piece of sweetwood from his pouch and seemed to consider it thoughtfully. "Ah! I hadn't thought how very

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strongly you must need tradition! You're very far from home indeed. Some thirty light years, is it not?" He bit into the wood, shaving a delicate curl from it with one corner of his razor sharp front tooth. The curl he swallowed, then he said, "Please, go on."

The control he had always fascinated Marianne—she would have preferred to watch him carve, but she spoke instead. "My family tradition is to celebrate a holiday called Christmas."

He swallowed another shaving and repeated, "Christmas."

"For some humans Christmas is a religious holiday. For my family, it was more of . . . a turning of the seasons. Now, Esperanza and I couldn't agree on a date—her homeworld's calendar runs differently than mine—but we both agreed on a need to celebrate Christmas once a year. So, since it's a solstice festival, I asked Muhammed what was the shortest day of the year on Rejoicing. He says that's Tamemb Nap Ohd."

Tatep bristled his ruff forward, confirming Muhammed's date.

"So I have decided to celebrate Christmas Eve on Tamemb Nap Ohd and to celebrate Christmas Day on Tememb Nap Chorr."

"Christmas is a revival, then? An awakening?"

"Yes, something like that. A renewal. A promise of spring to come."

"Yes, we have an Awakening on Tememb Nap Chorr as well."

Marianne nodded. "Many peoples do. Anyhow, I mentioned that I wanted to celebrate and a number of other people at the embassy decided it was a good idea. So, we're trying to put together something that resembles a Christmas celebration—mostly from local materials."

She gestured toward the player. "That piece of music is generally associated with Christmas. I've been playing it because it—gives me an anticipation of the Awakening to come."

Tatep was doing fine finishing work now, and Marianne had to stop to watch. The bit of sweetwood was turning into a pair of tommets—the Embassy staff had dubbed them "notrabbits" for their sexual proclivities—engaged in their mating dance. Tatep rattled his spines, amused, and passed the carving into her hands. He waited quietly while she turned it this way and that, admiring the exquisite workmanship.

"You don't get the joke," he said, at last.

"No, Tatep. I'm afraid I don't. Can you share it?"

"Look closely at their teeth."

Marianne did, and got the joke. The creatures were tommets, yes, but the teeth they had were not tommet teeth. They were the same sort of teeth that Tatep had used to carve them. Apparently, "fucking like tommets" was a Rejoicer joke.

"It's a gift for Hapet and Achinto. They had *six* children! We're all pleased and amazed for them."

Four to a brood was the usual, but birthings were few and far between.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A couple that had more than two birthings in a lifetime was considered unusually lucky.

"Congratulate them for me, if you think it appropriate," Marianne said. "Would it be proper for the embassy to send a gift?"

"Proper and most welcome. Hapet and Achinto will need help feeding that many."

"Would you help me choose? Something to make children grow healthy and strong, and something as well to delight their senses."

"I'd be glad to. Shall we go to the market or the wood?"

"Let's go chop our own, Tatep. I've been sitting behind this desk too damn long. I could use the exercise."

As Marianne rose, Tatep put his finished carving into his pouch and climbed down. "You will share more about Christmas with me while we work? You can talk and chop at the same time."

Marianne grinned. "I'll do better than that. You can help me choose something that we can use for a Christmas tree, as well. If it's something that is also edible when it has seasoned for a few weeks' time, that would be all the more to the spirit of the festival."

The two of them took a leisurely stroll down the narrow cobbled streets. Marianne shared more of her Christmas customs with Tatep and found her anticipation growing apace as she did.

At Tatep's suggestion they paused at Killim the glassblower's, where Tatep helped Marianne describe and order a dozen ornamental balls for the tree. Unaccustomed to the idea of purely ornamental glass objects, Killim was fascinated. "She says," reported Tatep when Marianne missed a few crucial words of her reply, "she'll make a number of samples and you'll return on Debem Op Chorr to choose the most proper."

Marianne nodded. Before she could thank Killim, however, she heard the door behind her open, heard a muffled squeak of surprise, and turned. Halemtat had ordered yet another of his subjects clipped—Marianne saw that much before the local beat a hasty retreat from the door and vanished.

"Oh, god," she said aloud. "Another one." That, she admitted to herself for the first time, was why she was making such an effort to recognize the individual Rejoicers by facial shape alone. She'd seen no less than fifty clipped in the year she'd been on Rejoicing. There was no doubt in her mind that this was a new one—the blunted tips of its quills had been bright and crisp. "Who is it this time, Tatep?"

Tatep ducked his head in shame. "Chornian," he said.

For once, Marianne couldn't restrain herself. "Why?" she asked, and she heard the unprofessional belligerence in her own voice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"For saying something I dare not repeat, not even in your language," Tatep said, "unless I wish to have *my* quills clipped."

Marianne took a deep breath. "I apologize for asking, Tatep. It was stupid of me." Best thing to do would be to get the hell out and let Chornian complete his errand without being shamed in front of the two of them. "Though," she said aloud, not caring if it was professional or not, "it's Halemtat who should be shamed, not Chornian."

Tatep's eyes widened, and Marianne knew she'd gone too far. She thanked the glassblower politely in Rejoicer and promised to return on Debem Op Chorr to examine the samples.

As they left Killim's, Marianne heard the scurry behind them—Chornian entering the shop as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. She set her mouth—her silence raging—and followed Tatep without a backward glance.

At last they reached the communal wood. Trying for some semblance of normalcy, Marianne asked Tatep for the particulars of an unfamiliar tree.

"*Huep*," he said. "Very good for carving, but not very good for eating." He paused a moment, thoughtfully. "I think I've put that wrong. The flavor is *very* good, but it's very low in food value. It grows prodigiously, though, so a lot of people eat too much of it when they shouldn't."

"Junk food," said Marianne, nodding. She explained the term to Tatep and he concurred. "Youngsters are particularly fond of it—but it wouldn't be a good gift for Hapet and Achinto."

"Then let's concentrate on good *healthy* food for Hapet and Achinto," said Marianne.

Deeper in the wood, they found a stand of the trees the embassy staff had dubbed gnomewood for its gnarly, stunted appearance. Tatep proclaimed this perfect, and Marianne set about to chop the proper branches. Gathering food was more a matter of pruning than chopping down, she'd learned, and she followed Tatep's careful instructions so she did not damage the tree's productive capabilities in the process.

"Now this one—just here," he said. "See, Marianne? Above the bole, for new growth will spring from the bole soon after your Awakening. If you damage the bole, however, there will be no new growth on this branch again."

Marianne chopped with care. The chopping took some of the edge off her anger. Then she inspected the gnomewood and found a second possibility. "Here," she said. "Would this be the proper place?"

"Yes," said Tatep, obviously pleased that she'd caught on so quickly. "That's right." He waited until she had lopped off the second branch and properly chosen a third and then he said, "Chornian said Halemtat had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the twining tricks of a *talemtat*. One of his children liked the rhyme and repeated it."

"*Talemtat* is the vine that strangles the tree it climbs, am I right?" She kept her voice very low.

Instead of answering aloud, Tatep nodded.

"Did Halemtat—did Halemtat order the child clipped as well?"

Tatep's eyelids shaded his pupils darkly. "The entire family. He ordered the entire family clipped."

So that was why Chornian was running the errands. He *would* risk his own shame to protect his family from the awful embarrassment—for a Rejoicer—of appearing in public with their quills clipped.

She took out her anger on yet another branch of the gnomewood. When the branch fell—on her foot, as luck would have it—she sat down of a heap, thinking to examine the bruise, then looked Tatep straight in the eye. "How long? How long does it take for the quills to grow out again?" After much of a year, she hadn't yet seen evidence that an adult's quills regenerated at all. "They do regrow?"

"After several Awakenings," he said. "The regrowth can be quickened by eating *welspeth*, but . . ."

But *welspeth* was a hot-house plant in this country. Too expensive for somebody like Chornian.

"I see," she said. "Thank you, Tatep."

"Be careful where you repeat what I've told you. Best you not repeat it at all." He cocked his head at her and added, with a rattle of quills, "I'm not sure where Halemtat would clip a human, or even if you'd feel shamed by a clipping, but I wouldn't like to be responsible for finding out."

Marianne couldn't help but grin. She ran a hand through her pale white hair. "I've had my head shaved—that was long ago and far away—and it was intended to shame me."

"Intended to?"

"I painted my naked scalp bright red and went about my business as usual. I set something of a new fashion and, in the end, it was the shaver who was—quite properly—shamed."

Tatep's eyelids once again shaded his eyes. "I must think about that," he said, at last. "We have enough branches for a proper gift now, Marianne. Shall we consider the question of your Christmas tree?"

"Yes," she said. She rose to her feet and gathered up the branches. "And another thing as well. . . . I'll need some more wood for carving. I'd like to carve some gifts for my friends, as well. That's another tradition of Christmas."

"Carving gifts? Marianne, you make Christmas sound as if it were a Rejoicing holiday!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marianne laughed. "It is, Tatep. I'll gladly share my Christmas with you."

Clarence Doggett was Super Plenipotentiary Representing Terra to Rejoicing and today he was dressed to live up to his extravagant title in striped silver tights and a purple silk weskit. No less than four hoops of office jangled from his belt. Marianne had, since meeting him, conceived the theory that the more stylishly outré his dress the more likely he was to say yes to the request of a subordinate. Scratch that theory. . . .

Clarence Doggett straightened his weskit with a tug and said, "We have no reason to write a letter of protest about Emperor Halemtat's treatment of Chornian. He's deprived us of a valuable worker, true, but . . ."

"Whatever happened to human rights?"

"They're not human, Marianne. They're aliens."

At least he hadn't called them "Pincushions" as he usually did, Marianne thought. Clarence Doggett was the unfortunate result of what the media had dubbed "the Grand Opening." One day humans had been alone in the galaxy, and the next they'd found themselves only a tiny fraction of the intelligent species. Setting up five hundred embassies in the space of a few years had strained the diplomatic service to the bursting point. Rejoicing, considered a backwater world, got the scrapings from the bottom of the barrel. Marianne was trying very hard not to be one of those scrapings, despite the example set by Clarence. She clamped her jaw shut very hard.

Clarence brushed at his fashionably large mustache and added, "It's not as if they'll *really* die of shame, after all."

"Sir," Marianne began.

He raised his hands. "The subject is closed. How are the plans coming for the Christmas bash?"

"Fine, sir," she said without enthusiasm. "Killim—she's the local glassblower—would like to arrange a trade for some dyes, by the way. Not just for the Christmas tree ornaments, I gather, but for some project of her own. I'm sending letters with Nick Minski to a number of glassblowers back home to find out what sort of dye is wanted."

"Good work. Any trade item that helps tie the Rejoicers into the galactic economy is a find. You're to be commended."

Marianne wasn't feeling very commended, but she said, "Thank you, sir."

"And keep up the good work—this Christmas idea of yours is turning out to be a big morale booster."

That was the dismissal. Marianne excused herself and, feet dragging, she headed back to her office. " 'They're not human,' " she muttered to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

herself. " 'They're aliens. It's not as if they'll *really* die of shame. . . .' " She slammed her door closed behind her and snarled aloud, "But Chornian can't keep up work and the kids can't play with their friends and his mate Chaylam can't go to the market. What if they starve?"

"They won't starve," said a firm voice.

Marianne jumped.

"It's just me," said Nick Minski. "I'm early." He leaned back in the chair and put his long legs up on her desk. "I've been watching how the neighbors behave. Friends—your friend Tatep included—take their leftovers to Chornian's family. They won't starve. At least, Chornian's family won't. I'm not sure what would happen to someone who is generally unpopular."

Nick was head of the ethnology team studying the Rejoicers. At least he had genuine observations to base his decisions on.

He tipped the chair to a precarious angle. "I can't begin to guess whether or not helping Chornian will land Tatep in the same hot water, so I can't reassure you there. I take it from your muttering that Clarence won't make a formal protest."

Marianne nodded.

He straightened the chair with a bang that made Marianne start. "Shit," he said. "Doggett's such a pissant."

Marianne grinned ruefully. "God, I'm going to miss you, Nick. Diplomats aren't permitted to speak in such matter-of-fact terms."

"I'll be back in a year. I'll bring you fireworks for your next Christmas." He grinned.

"We've been through that, Nick. Fireworks may be part of your family's Christmas tradition, but they're not part of mine. All that banging and flashing of light just wouldn't *feel* right to me, not on Christmas."

"Meanwhile," he went on, undeterred, "you think about my offer. You've learned more about Tatep and his people than half the folks on my staff; academic credentials or no, I can swing putting you on the ethnology team. We're short-handed as it is. I'd rather have skipped the rotation home this year, but . . ."

"You can't get everything you want, either."

He laughed. "I think they're afraid we'll all go native if we don't go home one year in five." He preened and grinned suddenly. "How d'you think I'd look in quills?"

"Sharp," she said and drew a second burst of laughter from him.

There was a knock at the door. Marianne stretched out a toe and tapped the latch. Tatep stood on the threshold, his quills still bristling from the cold. "Hi, Tatep—you're just in time. Come share."

His laughter subsiding to a chuckle, Nick took his feet from the desk and greeted Tatep in high-formal Rejoicer. Tatep returned the favor,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then added by way of explanation, "Marianne is sharing her Christmas with me."

Nick cocked his head at Marianne. "But it's not for some time yet. . . ."

"I know," said Marianne. She went to her desk and pulled out a wrapped package. "Tatep, Nick is my very good friend. Ordinarily, we exchange gifts on Christmas Day, but since Nick won't be here for Christmas, I'm going to give him his present now."

She held out the package. "Merry Christmas, Nick. A little too early, but—"

"You've hidden the gift in paper," said Tatep. "Is that also traditional?"

"Traditional but not necessary. Some of the pleasure is the surprise involved," Nick told the Rejoicer. With a sidelong glance and a smile at Marianne, he held the package to his ear and shook it. "And some of the pleasure is in trying to guess what's in the package." He shook it and listened again. "Nope, I haven't the faintest idea."

He laid the package in his lap.

Tatep flicked his tail in surprise. "Why don't you open it?"

"In my family, it's traditional to wait until Christmas Day to open your presents, even if they're wrapped and sitting under the Christmas tree in plain sight for three weeks or more."

Tatep clambered onto the stool to give him a stare of open astonishment from a more effective angle.

"Oh, no!" said Marianne. "Do you really mean it, Nick? You're *not* going to open it until Christmas Day?"

Nick laughed again. "I'm teasing." To Tatep, he said, "It's traditional in my family to wait—but it's also traditional to find some rationalization to open a gift the minute you lay hands on it. Marianne wants to see my expression; I think that takes precedence in this case."

His long fingers found a cranny in the paper wrapping and began to worry it ever so slightly. "Besides, our respective homeworlds can't agree on a date for Christmas. . . . On some world *today* must be Christmas, right?"

"Good rationalizing," said Marianne, with a sigh and a smile of relief. "Right!"

"Right," said Tatep, catching on. He leaned precariously from his perch to watch as Nick ripped open the wrapping paper.

"Tchaikovsky made me think of it," Marianne said. "Although, to be honest, Tchaikovsky's nutcracker wasn't particularly traditional. This one *is*: take a close look."

He did. He held up the brightly painted figure, took in its green weskit, its striped silver tights, its flamboyant mustache. Four metal loops jangled at its carved belt and Nick laughed aloud.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With a barely suppressed smile, Marianne handed him a "walnut" of the local variety.

Nick stopped laughing long enough to say, "You mean, this is a genuine, honest-to-god, *working* nutcracker?"

"Well, of course it is! My family's been making them for years." She made a motion with her hands to demonstrate. "Go ahead—crack that nut!"

Nick put the nut between the cracker's prominent jaws and, after a moment's hesitation, closed his eyes and went ahead. The nut gave with an audible and very satisfying craaack! and Nick began to laugh all over again.

"Share the joke," said Tatep.

"Gladly," said Marianne. "The Christmas nutcracker, of which that is a prime example, is traditionally carved to resemble an authority figure—particularly one nobody much likes. It's a way of getting back at the fraudulent, the pompous. Through the years they've poked fun at everybody from princes to policemen to"—Marianne waved a gracious hand at her own carved figure—"well, surely you recognize *him*."

"Oh, my," said Tatep, his eyes widening. "Clarence Doggett, is it not?" When Marianne nodded, Tatep said, "Are you about to get your head shaved again?"

Marianne laughed enormously. "If I do, Tatep, this time I'll paint my scalp red and green—traditional Christmas colors—and hang one of Killim's glass ornaments from my ear. Not likely, though," she added, to be fair. "Clarence doesn't go in for head shaving." To Nick, who had clearly taken in Tatep's "again," she said, "I'll tell you about it sometime."

Nick nodded and stuck another nut between Clarence's jaws. This time he watched as the nut gave way with a explosive bang. Still laughing, he handed the nutmeat to Tatep, who ate it and rattled his quills in laughter of his own. Marianne was doubly glad she'd invited Tatep to share the occasion—now she knew exactly what to make *him* for Christmas.

Christmas Eve found Marianne at a loss—something was missing from her holiday and she hadn't been able to put her finger on precisely what that something was.

It wasn't the color of the tree Tatep had helped her choose. The tree was the perfect Christmas tree shape, and if its foliage was a red so deep it approached black, that didn't matter a bit. "Next year we'll have Killim make some green ornaments," Marianne said to Tatep, "for the proper contrast."

Tinsel—silver thread she'd bought from one of the Rejoicer weavers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and cut to length—flew in all directions. All seven of the kids who'd come to Rejoicing with their ethnologist parents were showing the Rejoicers the "proper" way to hang tinsel, which meant more tinsel was making it onto the kids and the Rejoicers than onto the tree.

Just as well. She'd have to clean the tinsel off the tree before she passed it on to Hapet and Achinto—well-seasoned and just the thing for growing children.

Nick would really have enjoyed seeing this, Marianne thought. Esperanza was filming the whole party, but that just wasn't the same as being here.

Killim brought the glass ornaments herself. She'd made more than the commissioned dozen. The dozen glass balls she gave to Marianne. Each was a swirl of colors, each unique. Everyone ooohed and aaahed—but the best was yet to come. From her sidepack, Killim produced a second container. "Presents," she said. "A present for your Awakening Tree."

Inside the box was a menagerie of tiny, bright glass animals: notrabbits, fingerfish, wispwings. . . . Each one had a loop of glass at the top to allow them to be hung from the tree. Scarcely trusting herself with such delicate objects of art, Marianne passed them on to George to string and hang.

Later, she took Killim aside and, with Tatep's help, thanked her profusely for the gifts. "Though I'm not sure she should have. Tell her I'll be glad to pay for them, Tatep. If she'd had them in her shop, I'd have snapped them up on the spot. I didn't know how badly our Christmas needed them until I saw her unwrap them."

Tatep spoke for a long time to Killim, who rattled all the while. Finally, Tatep rattled too. "Marianne, three humans have commissioned Killim to make animals for them to send home." Killim said something Marianne didn't catch. "Three humans in the last five minutes. She says, Think of this set as a—as an advertisement."

"No, you may not pay me for them," Killim said, still rattling. "I have gained something to trade for my dyes."

"She says," Tatep began.

"It's okay, Tatep. That I understood."

Marianne hung the wooden ornaments she'd carved and painted in bright colors, then she unsnagged a handful of tinsel from Tatep's ruff, divided it in half, and they both flung it onto the tree. Tatep's handful just barely missed Matsimoto, who was hanging strings of beads he'd bought in the bazaar, but Marianne's got Juliet, who was hanging chains of paper cranes it must have taken her the better part of the month to fold. Juliet laughed and pulled the tinsel from her hair to drape it—length by length and *neatly*—over the deep red branches.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then Kelleb brought out the star. Made of silver wire delicately filigreed, it shone just the way a Christmas tree star should. He hoisted Juliet to his shoulders and she affixed it to the top of the tree and the entire company burst into cheers and applause.

Marianne sighed and wondered why that made her feel so down. "If Nick had been here," Tatep observed, "I believe he could have reached the top without an assistant."

"I think you're right," said Marianne. "I wish he *were* here. He'd enjoy this." Just for a moment, Marianne let herself realize that what was missing from this Christmas was Nick Minski.

"Next year," said Tatep.

"Next year," said Marianne. The prospect brightened her.

The tree glittered with its finery. For a moment they all stood back and admired it—then there was a scurry and a flurry as folks went to various bags and hiding places and brought out the brightly wrapped presents. Marianne excused herself from Tatep and Killim and brought out hers to heap at the bottom of the tree with the rest.

Again there was a moment's pause of appreciation. Then Clarence Doggett—of all people—raised his glass and said, "A toast! A Christmas toast! Here's to Marianne, for bringing Christmas thirty light years from old Earth!"

Marianne blushed as they raised their glasses to her. When they'd finished, she raised hers and found the right traditional response: "A Merry Christmas—and God bless us, every one!"

"Okay, Marianne. It's your call," said Esperanza. "Do we open the presents now or"—her voice turned to a mock whine—"do we *hafta* wait till tomorrow?"

Marianne glanced at Tatep. "What day is it now?" she asked. She knew enough about local time reckoning to know what answer he'd give.

"Why, today is Tememb Nap Chorr."

She grinned at the faces around her. "By Rejoicer reckoning, the day changes when the sun sets—it's been Christmas Day for an hour at least now. But stand back and let the kids find their presents first."

There was a great clamor and rustle of wrapping paper and whoops of delight as the kids dived into the pile of presents.

As Marianne watched with rising joy, Tatep touched her arm. "More guests," he said, and Marianne turned.

It was Chornian, his mate Chaylam, and their four children. Marianne's jaw dropped at the sight of them. She had invited the six with no hope of a response and here they were. "And all dressed up for Christmas!" she said aloud, though she knew Christmas was *not* the occasion. "You're as glittery as the Christmas tree itself," she told Chornian, her eyes gleaming with the reflection of it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ruff and tail, each and every one of Chornian's short-clipped quills was tipped by a brilliant red bead. "Glass?" she asked.

"Yes," said Chornian. "Killim made them for us."

"You look magnificent! Oh—how wonderful!" Chaylam's clipped quills had been dipped in gold; when she shifted shyly, her ruff and tail rippled with light. "You sparkle like sun on the water," Marianne told her. The children's ruffs and tails had been tipped in gold and candy pink and vivid yellow and—the last but certainly not the least—in beads every color of the rainbow.

"A kid after my own heart," said Marianne. "I think that would have been my choice too." She gave a closer look. "No two alike, am I right? Come—join the party. I was afraid I'd have to drop your presents by your house tomorrow. Now I get to watch you open them, to see if I chose correctly."

She escorted the four children to the tree and, thanking her lucky stars she'd had Tatep write their names on their packages, she left them to hunt for their presents. Those for their parents she brought back with her.

"It was difficult," Chornian said to Marianne. "It was difficult to walk through the streets with pride but—we did. And the children walked the proudest. They give us courage."

Chaylam said, "If only on their behalf."

"Yes," agreed Chornian. "Tomorrow I shall walk in the sunlight. I shall go to the bazaar. My clipped quills will glitter, and *I* will not be ashamed that I have spoken the truth about Halemtat."

That was all the Christmas gift Marianne needed, she thought to herself, and handed the wrapped package to Chornian. Tatep gave him a running commentary on the habits and rituals of the human Awakening as he opened the package. Chornian's eyes shaded and Tatep's running commentary ceased abruptly as they peered together into the box.

"Did I get it right?" said Marianne, suddenly afraid she'd committed some awful faux pas. She'd scoured the bazaar for *welspeth* shoots and, finding none, she'd pulled enough strings with the ethnology team to get some imported.

Tatep was the one who spoke. "You got it right," he said. "Chornian thanks you." Chornian spoke rapid-fire Rejoicer for a long time; Marianne couldn't follow the half of it. When he'd finished, Tatep said simply, "He regrets that he has no present to give you."

"It's not necessary. Seeing those kids all in spangles brightened up the party—that's present enough for me!"

"Nevertheless," said Tatep, speaking slowly so she wouldn't miss a word. "Chornian and I make you this present."

Marianne knew the present Tatep drew from his pouch was from Tatep

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

alone, but she was happy enough to play along with the fiction if it made him happy. She hadn't expected a present from Tatep and she could scarcely wait to see what it was he felt appropriate to the occasion.

Still, she gave it the proper treatment—shaking it, very gently, beside her ear. If there was anything to hear, it was drowned out by the robust singing of carols from the other side of the room. "I can't begin to guess, Tatep," she told him happily.

"Then open it."

She did. Inside the paper, she found a carving, the rich wine-red of burgundy-wood, bitter to the taste and therefore rarely carved but treasured because none of the kids would gnaw on it as they tested their teeth. The style of carving was so utterly Rejoicer that it took her a long moment to recognize the subject, but once she did, she knew she'd treasure the gift for a lifetime.

It was unmistakeably Nick—but Nick as seen from Tatep's point of view, hence the unfamiliar perspective. It was Looking Up At Nick.

"Oh, Tatep!" And then she remembered just in time and added, "Oh, Chornian! Thank you both so very much. I can't *wait* to show it to Nick when he gets back. Whatever made you think of doing Nick?"

Tatep said, "He's your best *human* friend. I know you miss him. You have no pictures; I thought you would feel better with a likeness."

She hugged the sculpture to her. "Oh, I do. Thank you, both of you." Then she motioned, eyes shining. "Wait. Wait right here, Tatep. Don't go away."

She darted to the tree and, pushing aside wads of rustling paper, she found the gift she'd made for Tatep. Back she darted to where the Rejoicers were waiting.

"I waited," Tatep said solemnly.

She handed him the package. "I hope this is worth the wait."

Tatep shook the package. "I can't begin to guess," he said.

"Then open it. *I* can't stand the wait!"

He ripped away the paper as flamboyantly as Nick had—to expose the brightly colored nutcracker and a woven bag of nuts.

Marianne held her breath. The problem had been, of course, to adapt the nutcracker to a recognizable Rejoicer version. She'd made the Emperor Halemtat sit back on his haunches, which meant far less adaptation of the cracking mechanism. Overly plump, she'd made him, and spiky. In his right hand, he carried an oversized pair of scissors—of the sort his underlings used for clipping quills. In his left, he carried a sprig of *talemtat*, that unfortunate rhyme for his name.

Chornian's eyes widened. Again, he rattled off a spate of Rejoicer too fast for Marianne to follow . . . except that Chornian seemed anxious.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Only then did Marianne realize what she'd done. "Oh, my God, Tatep! He wouldn't clip your quills for *having* that, would he?"

Tatep's quills rattled and rattled. He put one of the nuts between Halemtat's jaws and cracked with a vengeance. The nutmeat he offered to Marianne, his quills still rattling. "If he does, Marianne, you'll come to Killim's to help me chose a good color for *my* glass beading!"

He cracked another nut and handed the meat to Chornian. The next thing Marianne knew, the two of them were rattling at each other—Chornian's glass beads adding a splendid tinkling to the merriment.

Much relieved, Marianne laughed with them. A few minutes later, Esperanza dashed out to buy more nuts—so Chornian's children could each take a turn at the cracking.

Marianne looked down at the image of Nick cradled in her arm. "I'm sorry you missed this," she told it, "but I promise I'll write everything down for you before I go to bed tonight. I'll try to remember every last bit of it for you."

"Dear Nick," Marianne wrote in another letter some months later. "You're not going to approve of this. I find I haven't been ethnologically correct—much less diplomatic. I'd only meant to share my Christmas with Tatep and Chornian and, for that matter, whoever wanted to join in the festivities. To hear Clarence tell it, I've sent Rejoicing to hell in a handbasket.

"You see, it does Halemtat no good to clip quills these days. There are some seventy-five Rejoicers walking around town clipped and beaded—as gaudy and as shameless as you please. I even saw one newly male (teenager) with beads on the ends of his unclipped spines!

"Killim says thanks for the dyes, by the way. They're just what she had in mind. She's so busy, she's taken on two apprentices to help her. She makes 'Christmas ornaments' and half the art galleries in the known universe are after her for more and more. The apprentices make glass beads. One of them—one of Chornian's kids, by the way—hit upon the bright idea of making simple sets of beads that can be stuck on the ends of quills cold. Saves time and trouble over the hot glass method.

"What's more—

"Well, yesterday I stopped by to say 'hi' to Killim, when who should turn up but Koppen—you remember him? He's one of Halemtat's advisors? You'll never guess what he wanted: a set of quill tipping beads.

"No, he hadn't had his quills clipped. Nor was he buying them for a friend. He was planning, he told Killim, to tell Halemtat a thing or two—I missed the details because he went too fast—and he expected he'd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be clipped for it, so he was planning ahead. Very expensive *blue* beads for him, if you please, Killim!

"I find myself unprofessionally pleased. There's a thing or two Halemtat *ought* to be told. . . .

"Meanwhile, Chornian has gone into the business of making nutcrackers. —All right, so sue me, I showed him how to make the actual cracker work. It was that or risk his taking Tatep's present apart to find out for himself.

"I'm sending holos—including a holo of the one I made—because you've got to see the transformation Chornian's worked on mine. The difference between a human-carved nutcracker and a Rejoicer-carved nutcracker is as unmistakable as the difference between Looking Up At Nick and . . . well, *looking up at Nick*.

"I still miss you, even if you do think fireworks are appropriate at Christmas.

"See you soon—if Clarence doesn't boil me in my own pudding and bury me with a stake of holly through my heart."

Marianne sat with her light pen poised over the screen for a long moment, then she added, "Love, Marianne," and saved it to the next outgoing Dirt-bound mail.

Rejoicing
Midsummer's Eve
(Rejoicer reckoning)

Dear Nick—

This time it's not my fault. This time it's Esperanza's doing. Esperanza decided, for *her* contribution to our round of holidays, to celebrate Martin Luther King Day. (All right—if I'd known about Martin Luther King I'd probably have suggested a celebration myself—but I didn't. Look him up; you'll like him.) And she invited a handful of the Rejoicers to attend as well.

Now, the final part of the celebration is that each person in turn "has a dream." This is not like wishes, Nick. This is more on the order of setting yourself a goal, even one that looks to all intents and purposes to be unattainable, but one you will strive to attain. Even Clarence got so into the occasion that he had a dream that he would stop thinking of the Rejoicers as "Pincushions" so he could start thinking of them as Rejoicers. Esperanza said later Clarence didn't quite get the point but for him she supposed that was a step in the right direction.

Well, after that, Tatep asked Esperanza, in his very polite fashion, if it would be proper for him to have a dream as well. There was some consultation over the proper phrasing—Esperanza says her report will tell you all about that—and then Tatep rose and said, "I have a dream . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I have a dream that someday no one will get his quills clipped for speaking the truth."

(You'll see it on the tape. Everybody agreed that this was a good dream, indeed.)

After which, Esperanza had her dream "for human rights for all."

Following which, of course, we all took turns trying to explain the concept of "human rights" to a half-dozen Rejoicers. Esperanza ended up translating five different constitutions for them—*and* an entire book of speeches by Martin Luther King.

Oh, god. I just realized . . . maybe it *is* my fault. I'd forgotten till just now. Oh. You judge, Nick.

About a week later Tatep and I were out gathering wood for some carving he plans to do—for Christmas, he says, but he wanted to get a good start on it—and he stopped gnawing long enough to ask me, "Marianne, what's 'human'?"

"How do you mean?"

"I think when Clarence says 'human,' he means something different than you do."

"That's entirely possible. Humans use words pretty loosely at the best of times—there, I just did it myself."

"What do you mean when you say 'human'?"

"Sometimes I mean the species *homo sapiens*. When I say, Humans use words pretty loosely, I do. Rejoicers seem to be more particular about their speech, as a general rule."

"And when you say 'human rights,' what do you mean?"

"When I say 'human rights,' I mean *Homo sapiens* and *Rejoicing sapiens*. I mean any *sapiens*, in that context. I wouldn't guarantee that Clarence uses the word the same way in the same context."

"You think I'm human?"

"I *know* you're human. We're friends, aren't we? I couldn't be friends with—oh, a notrabbit—now, could I?"

He made that wonderful rattly sound he does when he's amused. "No, I can't imagine it. Then, if I'm human, I ought to have human rights."

"Yes," I said, "You bloody well ought to."

Maybe it is all my fault. Esperanza will tell you the rest—she's had Rejoicers all over her house for the past two weeks—they're watching every scrap of film she's got on Martin Luther King.

I don't know how this will all end up, but I wish to hell you were here to watch.

Love, Marianne

Marianne watched the Rejoicer child crack nuts with his Halemtat cracker and a cold, cold shiver went up her spine. That was the eleventh

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she'd seen this week. Chornian wasn't the only one making them, apparently; somebody else had gone into the nutcracker business as well. This was, however, the first time she'd seen a child cracking nuts with Halemtat's jaw.

"Hello," she said, stooping to meet the child's eyes. "What a pretty toy! Will you show me how it works?"

Rattling all the while, the child showed her, step by step. Then he (or she—it wasn't polite to ask before puberty) said, "Isn't it funny? It makes Mama laugh and laugh and laugh."

"And what's your mama's name?"

"Pilli," said the child. Then it added, "With the green and white beads on her quills."

Pilli—who'd been clipped for saying that Halemtat had been overcutting the imperial reserve so badly that the trees would never grow back properly.

And then she realized that, less than a year ago, no child would have admitted that its mama had been clipped. The very thought of it would have shamed both mother *and* child.

Come to think of it . . . she glanced around the bazaar and saw no less than four clipped Rejoicers shopping for dinner. Two of them she recognized as Chornian and one of his children, the other two were new to her. She tried to identify them by their snouts and failed utterly—she'd have to ask Chornian. She also noted, with utterly unprofessional satisfaction, that she *could* ask Chornian such a thing now. That too would have been unthinkable and shaming less than a year ago.

Less than a year ago. She was thinking in Dirt terms because of Nick. There wasn't any point dropping him a line; mail would cross in deep space at this late a date. He'd be here just in time for "Christmas." She wished like hell he was already here. He'd know what to make of all this, she was certain.

As Marianne thanked the child and got to her feet, three Rejoicers—all with the painted ruff of quills at their necks that identified them as Halemtat's guards—came waddling officiously up. "Here's one," said the largest. "Yes," said another. "Caught in the very act."

The largest squatted back on his haunches and said, "You will come with us, child. Halemtat decrees it."

Horror shot through Marianne's body.

The child cracked one last nut, rattled happily, and said, "I get my quills clipped?"

"Yes," said the largest Rejoicer. "You will have your quills clipped." Roughly, he separated child from nutcracker and began to tow the child away, each of them in that odd three-legged gait necessitated by the grip.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

All Marianne could think to do was call after the child, "I'll tell Pilli what happened and where to find you!"

The child glanced over its shoulder, rattled again, and said, "Ask her could I have silver beads like Hortap!"

Marianne picked up the discarded nutcracker—lest some other child find it and meet the same fate—and ran full speed for Pilli's house.

At the corner, two children looked up from their own play and galloped along beside her until she skidded to a halt by Pilli's bakery. They followed her in, rattling happily to themselves over the race they'd run. Marianne's first thought was to shoo them off before she told Pilli what had happened, but Pilli greeted the two as if they were her own, and Marianne found herself blurting out the news.

Pilli gave a slow inclination of the head. "Yes," she said, pronouncing the words carefully so Marianne wouldn't miss them, "I expected that. Had it not been the nutcracker, it would have been words." She rattled. "That child is the most outspoken of my brood."

"But—" Marianne wanted to say, Aren't you afraid? but the question never surfaced.

Pilli gave a few coins to the other children and said, "Run to Killim's, my dears, and ask her to make a set of silver beads, if she doesn't already have one on hand. Then run tell your father what has happened."

The children were off in the scurry of excitement.

Pilli drew down the awning in front of her shop, then paused. "I think you are afraid for my child."

"Yes," said Marianne. Lying had never been her strong suit; maybe Nick was right—maybe diplomacy wasn't her field.

"You are kind," said Pilli. "But don't be afraid. Even Halemtat wouldn't dare to order a child *hashay*."

"I don't understand the term."

"*Hashay?*" Pilli flipped her tail around in front of her and held out a single quill. "Chippet will be clipped here," she said, drawing a finger across the quill about half-way up its length. "*Hashay* is to clip here." The finger slid inward, to a spot about a quarter of an inch from her skin. "Don't worry, Marianne. Even Halemtat wouldn't dare to *hashay* a child."

I'm supposed to be reassured, thought Marianne. "Good," she said aloud, "I'm relieved to hear that." In truth, she hadn't the slightest idea what Pilli was talking about—and she was considerably less than reassured by the ominous implications of the distinction. She'd never come across the term in any of the ethnologists' reports.

She was still holding the Halemtat nutcracker in her hands. Now she considered it carefully. Only in its broadest outlines did it resemble the one she'd made for Tatep. This nutcracker was purely Rejoicer in style

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and—she almost dropped it at the sudden realization—peculiarly *Tatep's* style of carving. Tatep was making them too?

If *she* could recognize Tatep's distinctive style, surely Halemtat could—what then?

Carefully, she tucked the nutcracker under the awning—let Pilli decide what to do with the object; Marianne couldn't make the decision for her—and set off at a quick pace for Tatep's house.

On the way, she passed yet another child with a Halemtat nutcracker. She paused, found the child's father and passed the news to him that Halemtat's guards were clipping Pilli's child for the "offense." The father thanked her for the information and, with much politeness, took the nutcracker from the child.

This one, Marianne saw, was *not* carved in Tatep's style or in Chornian's. This one was the work of an unfamiliar set of teeth.

Having shooed his child indoors, the Rejoicer squatted back on his haunches. In plain view of the street, he took up the bowl of nuts his child had left uncracked and began to crack them, one by one, with such deliberation that Marianne's jaw dropped.

She'd never seen an insolent Rejoicer but she would have bet money she was seeing one now. He even managed to make the crack of each nut resound like a gunshot. With the sound still ringing in her ears, Marianne quickened her steps toward Tatep's.

She found him at home, carving yet another nutcracker. He swallowed, then held out the nutcracker to her and said, "What do you think, Marianne? Do you approve of my portrayal?"

This one wasn't Halemtat, but his—for want of a better word—grand vizier, Corten. The grand vizier always looked to her as if he smirked. She knew the expression was due to a slightly malformed tooth but, to a human eye, the result was a smirk. Tatep's portrayal had the same smirk, only more so. Marianne couldn't help it . . . she giggled.

"Aha!" said Tatep, rattling up a rainstorm's worth of sound. "For once, you've shared the joke without the need of explanation!" He gave a long grave look at the nutcracker. "The grand vizier has earned his keep this once!"

Marianne laughed, and Tatep rattled. This time the sound of the quills sobered Marianne. "I think your work will get you clipped, Tatep," she said, and she told him about Pilli's child.

He made no response. Instead, he dropped to his feet and went to the chest in the corner, where he kept any number of carvings and other precious objects. From the chest, he drew out a box. Three-legged, he walked back to her. "Shake this! I'll bet you can guess what's inside."

Curious, she shook the box: it rattled. "A set of beads," she said.

"You see? I'm prepared. They rattle like a laugh, don't they?—a laugh

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at Halemtat. I asked Killim to make the beads red because that was the color you painted your scalp when you were clipped."

"I'm honored. . . ."

"But?"

"But I'm afraid for you. For *all* of you."

"Pilli's child wasn't afraid."

"No. No, Pilli's child wasn't afraid. Pilli said even Halemtat wouldn't dare hashay a child." Marianne took a deep breath and said, "But you're not a child." And I don't know what hashaying does to a Rejoicer, she wanted to add.

"I've swallowed a talpseed," Tatep said, as if that said it all.

"I don't understand."

"Ah! I'll share, then. A talpseed can't grow unless it has been through the"—he patted himself—"stomach? digestive system? of a Rejoicer. Sometimes they don't grow even then. To swallow a talpseed means to take a step toward the growth of something important. I swallowed a talpseed called 'human rights.' "

There was nothing Marianne could say to that but: "I understand."

Slowly, thoughtfully, Marianne made her way back to the embassy. Yes, she understood Tatep—hadn't she been screaming at Clarence for just the same reason? But she was terrified for Tatep—for them all.

Without consciously meaning to, she bypassed the embassy for the little clutch of domes that housed the ethnologists. Esperanza—it was Esperanza she had to see.

She was in luck. Esperanza was at home writing up one of her reports. She looked up and said, "Oh, good. It's time for a break!"

"Not a break, I'm afraid. A question that, I think, is right up your alley. Do you know much about the physiology of the Rejoicers?"

"I'm the expert," Esperanza said, leaning back in her chair. "As far as there is one in the group."

"What happens if you cut a Rejoicer's spine"—she held up her fingers—"*this* close to the skin?"

"Like a cat's claw, sort of. If you cut the tip, nothing happens. If you cut too far down, you hit the blood supply—and maybe the nerve. The quill would bleed most certainly. Might never grow back properly. And it'd hurt like hell, I'm sure—like gouging the base of your thumbnail."

She sat forward suddenly. "Marianne, you're shaking. What is it?"

Marianne took a deep breath but couldn't stop shaking. "What would happen if somebody did that to all of Ta"—she found she couldn't get the name out—"all of a Rejoicer's quills?"

"He'd bleed to death, Marianne." Esperanza took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze. "Now, I'm going to get you a good stiff drink and you are going to tell me all about it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fighting nausea, Marianne nodded. "Yes," she said with enormous effort. "Yes."

"Who the *hell* told the Pincushions about 'human rights'?" Clarence roared. Furious, he glowered down at Marianne and waited for her response.

Esperanza drew herself up to her full height and stepped between the two of them. "Martin Luther King told the *Rejoicers* about human rights. You were there when he did it. Though you seem to have forgotten *your* dream, obviously the Rejoicers haven't forgotten theirs."

"There's a goddamned revolution going on out there!" Clarence waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the center of town.

"That is certainly what it looks like," Juliet said mildly. "So why are we here instead of out there observing?"

"You're here because I'm responsible for your safety."

"Bull," said Matsimoto. "Halemtat isn't interested in clipping *us*."

"Besides," said Esperanza. "The supply ship will be landing in about five minutes. Somebody's got to go pick up the supplies—and Nick. Otherwise, he's going to step right into the thick of it. The last mail went out two months ago. Nick's had no warning that the situation has"—she frowned slightly, then brightened as she found the proper phrase—"changed *radically*."

Clarence glared again at Marianne. "As a member of the embassy staff, you are assigned the job. You will pick up the supplies and Nick."

Marianne, who'd been about to volunteer to do just that, suppressed the urge to say, "Thank you!" and said instead, "Yes, sir."

Once out of Clarence's sight, Marianne let herself breathe a sigh of relief. The supply transport was built like a tank. While Marianne wasn't any more afraid of Halemtat's wrath than the ethnologists, she was well aware that innocent *Dirt* bystanders might easily find themselves stuck—all too literally—in a mob of Rejoicers. When the Rejoicers fought, as she understood it, they used teeth and quills. She had no desire to get too close to a lashing tail-full. An unclipped quill was needle-sharp.

Belatedly, she caught the significance of the clipping Halemtat had instituted as punishment. Slapping a snout with a tail full of glass beads was not nearly as effective as slapping a snout with a morning-star made of spines.

She radioed the supply ship to tell them they'd all have to wait for transport before they came out. Captain's gonna love that, I'm sure, she thought, until she got a response from Captain Tertain. By reputation he'd never set foot on a world other than Dirt and certainly didn't intend to do so now. So she simply told Nick to stay put until she came for him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nick's cheery voice over the radio said only, "It's going to be a very special Christmas this year."

"Nick," she said, "You don't know the half of it."

She took a slight detour along the way, passing the narrow street that led to Tatep's house. She didn't dare to stop, but she could see from the awning that he wasn't home. In fact, nobody seemed to be home . . . even the bazaar was deserted.

The supply truck rolled on, and Marianne took a second slight detour. What Esperanza had dubbed "the Grande Allez" led directly to Halemtat's imperial residence. The courtyard was filled with Rejoicers. Well-spaced Rejoicers, she saw, for they were—each and every one—bristled to their fullest extent. She wished she dared go for a closer look, but Clarence would be livid if she took much more time than normal reaching the supply ship. And he'd be checking—she knew his habits well enough to know that.

She floored the accelerator and made her way to the improvised landing field in record time. Nick waved to her from the port and stepped out. Just like Nick, she thought. She'd told him to wait in the ship until she arrived; he'd obeyed to the letter. It was all she could do to keep from hugging him as she hit the ground beside him. With a grateful sigh of relief, she said, "We've got to move fast on the transfer, Nick. I'll fill you in as we load."

By the time the two of them had transferred all the supplies from the ship, she'd done just that.

He climbed into the seat beside her, gave her a long thoughtful look, and said, "So Clarence has restricted all of the *other* ethnologists to the embassy grounds, has he?" He shook his head in mock sadness and clicked his tongue. "I see I haven't trained my team in the proper response to embassy edicts." He grinned at Marianne. "So the embassy advises that I stay off the streets, does it?"

"Yes," said Marianne. She hated being the one to tell him but he'd asked her. "The Super Plenipotentiary Etc. has issued a full and formal Advisory to all non-governmental personnel. . . ."

"Okay," said Nick. "You've done your job: I've been Advised. Now I want to go have a look at this revolution-in-progress." He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

He was right. All Clarence could do was issue an Advisory; he had no power whatsoever to keep the ethnologists off the streets. And Marianne wanted to see the revolution as badly as Nick did.

"All right," she said. "I *am* responsible for your safety, though, so best we go in the transport. I don't want you stuck." She set the supply-transport into motion and headed back toward the Grande Allez.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nick pressed his nose to the window and watched the streets as they went. He was humming cheerfully under his breath.

"Uh, Nick—if Clarence calls us . . ."

"We'll worry about that when it happens," he said.

Worry is right, thought Marianne, but she smiled. He'd been humming Christmas carols, like some excited child. Inappropriate as all hell, but she liked him all the more for it.

She pulled the supply-transport to a stop at the entrance to the palace courtyard and turned to ask Nick if he had a good enough view. He was already out the door and making his way carefully into the crowd of Rejoicers. "Hey!" she shouted—and she hit the ground running to catch up with him. "Nick!"

He paused long enough for her to catch his arm, then said, "I need to see this, Marianne. It's my *job*."

"It's *my* job to see you don't get hurt—"

He smiled. "Then you lead. I want to be over there where I can see and hear everything Halemtat and his advisors are up to."

Marianne harbored a brief fantasy about dragging him bodily back to the safety of the supply-transport, but he was twice her weight and, from his expression, not about to cooperate. Best she lead, then. Her only consolation was that, when Clarence tried to radio them, there'd be nobody to pick up and receive his orders.

"Hey, Marianne!" said Chornian from the crowd. "Over here! Good view from here!"

And safer too. Grateful for the invitation, Marianne gingerly headed in that direction. Several quilled Rejoicers eased aside to let the two of them safely through. Better to be surrounded by beaded Rejoicers.

"Welcome back, Nick," said Chornian. He and Chaylam stepped apart to create a space of safety for the two humans. "You're just in time."

"So I see. What's going on?"

"Halemtat just had Pilli's Chippet clipped for playing with a Halemtat cracker. Halemtat doesn't *like* the Halemtat crackers."

Beside him, a fully quilled Rejoicer said, "Halemtat doesn't like much of anything. I think a proper prince ought to rattle his spines once or twice a year at least."

Marianne frowned up at Nick, who grinned and said, "Roughly translated: Hapter thinks a proper prince ought to have a sense of humor, however minimal."

"Rattle your spines, Halemtat!" shouted a voice from the crowd. "Let's see if you can do it."

"Yes," came another voice—and Marianne realized it was Chornian's—"Rattle your spines, Great Prince of the Nutcrackers!"

All around them, like rain on a tin roof, came the sound of rattling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spines. Marianne looked around—the laughter swept through the crowd, setting every Rejoicer in vibrant motion. Even the grand vizier rattled briefly, then caught himself, his ruff stiff with alarm.

Halemtat didn't rattle.

From his pouch, Chornian took a nutcracker and a nut. Placing the nut in the cracker's smirking mouth, Chornian made the bite cut through the rattling of the crowd like the sound of a shot. From somewhere to her right, a second crack resounded. Then a third. . . . Then the rattling took up a renewed life.

Marianne felt as if she were under water. All around her spines shifted and rattled. Chornian's beaded spines chattered as he cracked a second nut in the smirking face of the nutcracker.

Then one of Halemtat's guards ripped the nutcracker from Chornian's hands. The guard glared at Chornian, who rattled all the harder.

Looking over his shoulder to Halemtat, the guard called, "He's already clipped. What shall I do?"

"Bring me the nutcracker," said Halemtat. The guard glared again at Chornian, who had not stopped laughing, and loped back with the nutcracker in hand. Belatedly, Marianne recognized the smirk on the nutcracker's face.

The guard handed the nutcracker to the grand vizier—Marianne knew beyond a doubt that he recognized the smirk too.

"Whose teeth carved this?" demanded Halemtat.

An unclipped Rejoicer worked his way to the front of the crowd, sat proudly back on his haunches, and said, "Mine." To the grand vizier, he added, with a slight rasp of his quills that was a barely suppressed laugh, "What do you think of my work, Corten? Does it amuse you? You have a strong jaw."

Rattling swept the crowd again.

Halemtat sat up on his haunches. His bristles stood straight out. Marianne had never seen a Rejoicer bristle quite that way before. "Silence!" he bellowed.

Startled, either by the shout or by the electrified bristle of their ruler, the crowd spread itself thinner. The laughter had subsided only because each of the Rejoicers had gone as bristly as Halemtat. Chornian shifted slightly to keep Marianne and Nick near the protected cover of his beaded ruff.

"Marianne," said Nick softly, "That's Tatep."

"I know," she said. Without meaning to, she'd grabbed his arm for reassurance.

Tatep. . . . He sat back on his haunches, as if fully at ease—the only sleeked Rejoicer in the courtyard. He might have been sitting in Marianne's office discussing different grades of wood, for all the excitement he displayed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Halemtat, rage quivering in every quill, turned to his guards and said, "Clip Tatep. *Hashay.*"

"*No!*" shouted Marianne, starting forward. As she realized she'd spoken Dirtside and opened her mouth to shout it again in Rejoicer, Nick grabbed her and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"*No!*" shouted Chornian, seeming to translate for her, but speaking his own mind.

Marianne fought Nick's grip in vain. Furious, she bit the hand he'd clapped over her mouth. When he yelped and removed it—still not letting her free—she said, "It'll kill him! He'll bleed to death! Let me *go.*" On the last word, she kicked him hard, but he didn't let go.

A guard produced the ritual scissors and handed them to the official in charge of clipping. She held the instrument aloft and made the ritual display, clipping the air three times. With each snap of the scissors, the crowd chanted, "No. No. No."

Taken aback, the official paused. Halemtat clicked at her and she abruptly remembered the rest of the ritual. She turned to make the three ritual clips in the air before Halemtat.

This time the voice of the crowd was stronger. "No. No. No," came the shout with each snap.

Marianne struggled harder as the official stepped toward Tatep. . . .

Then the grand vizier scuttled to intercept. "No," he told the official. Turning to Halemtat, he said, "The image is mine. *I* can laugh at the caricature. Why is it, I wonder, that you can't, Halemtat? Has some disease softened your spines so that they no longer rattle?"

Marianne was so surprised she stopped struggling against Nick's hold—and felt the hold ease. He didn't let go, but held her against him in what was almost an embrace. Marianne held her breath, waiting for Halemtat's reply.

Halemtat snatched the ritual scissors from the official and threw them at Corten's feet. "You," he said. "You will hashay Tatep."

"No," said Corten. "I won't. *My* spines are still stiff enough to rattle."

Chornian chose that moment to shout once more, "Rattle your spines, Halemtat! Let us hear you rattle your spines!"

And without so much as a by-your-leave the entire crowd suddenly took up the chant: "Rattle your spines! Rattle your spines!"

Halemtat looked wildly around. He couldn't have rattled if he'd wanted to—his spines were too bristled to touch one to another. He turned his glare on the official, as if willing her to pick up the scissors and proceed.

Instead, she said, in perfect cadence with the crowd, "Rattle your spines!"

Halemtat made an imperious gesture to his guard—and the guard said, "Rattle your spines!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Halemtat turned and galloped full tilt into his palace. Behind him the chant continued—"Rattle your spines! Rattle your spines!"

Then, quite without warning, Tatep rattled his spines. The next thing Marianne knew, the entire crowd was laughing and laughing and laughing at their vanished ruler.

Marianne went limp against Nick. He gave her a suggestion of a hug, then let her go. Against the rattle of the crowd, he said, "I thought you were going to get yourself killed, you little idiot."

"I couldn't—I couldn't stand by and do *nothing*; they might have killed Tatep."

"I thought doing nothing was a diplomat's job."

"You're right; some diplomat I make. Well, after this little episode, I probably don't have a job anyhow."

"My offer's still open."

"Tell the truth, Nick. If I'd been a member of your team fifteen minutes ago, would you have let me go?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Of course not," he said. "But at least I understand why you bit the hell out of my hand."

"Oh, god, Nick! I'm so sorry! Did I hurt you?"

"Yes," he said. "But I accept your apology—and next time I won't give you that option."

" 'Next time,' huh?"

Nick, still grinning, nodded.

Well, there was that to be said for Nick: he was realistic.

"Hi, Nick," said Tatep. "Welcome back."

"Hi, Tatep. Some show you folks laid on. What happens next?"

Tatep rattled the length of his body. "Your guess is as good as mine," he said. "I've never done anything like this before. Corten's still rattling. In fact, he asked me to make him a grand vizier nutcracker. I think I'll make him a present of it—for Christmas."

He turned to Marianne. "Share?" he said. "I was too busy to watch at the time. Were you and Nick mating? If you do it again, may I watch?"

Marianne turned a vivid shade of red, and Nick laughed entirely too much. "You explain it to him," Marianne told Nick firmly. "Mating habits are not within my diplomatic jurisdiction. And I'm still in the diplomatic corps—at least, until we get back to the embassy."

Tatep sat back on his haunches, eagerly awaiting Nick's explanation. Marianne shivered with relief and said hastily, "No, it wasn't mating, Tatep. I was so scared for you I was going to charge in and—well, I don't know what I was going to do after that—but I couldn't just stand by and let Halemtat hurt you." She scowled at Nick and finished, "Nick was afraid I'd get hurt myself and wouldn't let me go."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tatep's eyes widened in surprise. "Marianne, you would have fought for me?"

"Yes. You're my friend."

"Thank you," he said solemnly. Then to Nick, he said, "You were right to hold her back. Rattling is a better way than fighting." He turned again to Marianne. "You surprise me," he said. "You showed us how to rattle at Halemtat."

He shook from snout to tail-tip, with a sound like a hundred snare drums. "Halemtat turned tail and *ran* from our rattling!"

"And now?" Nick asked him.

"Now I'm going to go home. It's almost dinner time and I'm hungry enough to eat an entire tree all by myself." Still rattling, he added, "Too bad the hardwood I make the nutcrackers from is so bitter—though tonight I could almost make an exception and dine exclusively on bitter wood."

Tatep got down off his haunches and started for home. Most of the crowd had dispersed as well. It seemed oddly anticlimactic, until Marianne heard and saw the rattles of laughter ripple through the departing Rejoicers.

Beside the supply-transport, Tatep paused. "Nick, at your convenience—I really *would* like you to share about human mating. For friendship's sake, I should know when Marianne is fighting and when she's mating. Then I'd know whether she needs help or—or what kind of help she needs. After all, some trees need help to mate. . . ."

Marianne had turned scarlet again. Nick said, "I'll tell you all about it as soon as I get settled in again."

"Thank you." Tatep headed for home, for all the world as if nothing unusual had happened. In fact, the entire crowd, laughing as it was, might have been a crowd of picnickers off for home as the sun began to set.

A squawk from the radio brought Marianne back to business. No use putting it off. Time to bite the bullet and check in with Clarence—if nothing else, the rest of the staff would be worried about both of them.

Marianne climbed into the cab. Without prompting, Nick climbed in beside her. For a long moment, they listened to the diatribe that came over the radio, but Marianne made no move to reply. Instead, she watched the Rejoicers laughing their way home from the palace courtyard.

"Nick," she said. "Can you really laugh a dictator into submission?"

He cocked a thumb at the radio. "Give it a try," he said. "It's not worth cursing back at Clarence—you haven't his gift for bureaucratic invective."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marianne also didn't have a job by the time she got back to the embassy. Clarence had tried to clap her onto the returning supply ship, but Nick stepped in to announce that Clarence had no business sending anybody from his ethnology staff home. In the end, Clarence's bureaucratic invective had failed him and the ethnologists simply disobeyed, as Nick had. All Clarence could do, after all, was issue a directive; if they chose to ignore it, the blame no longer fell on Clarence. Since that was all that worried Clarence, that was all right.

In the end, Marianne found that being an ethnologist was considerably more interesting than being a diplomat . . . especially during a revolution.

She and Nick, with Tatep, had taken time off from their mutual studies to chose this year's Christmas tree—from Halemtat's reserve. "Why," said Marianne, bemused at her own reaction, "do I feel like I'm cutting a Christmas tree with Thomas Jefferson?"

"Because you are," Nick said. "Even Thomas Jefferson did ordinary things once in a while. Chances are, he even hung out with his friends. . . ." He waved. "Hi, Tatep. How goes the revolution?"

For answer, Tatep rattled the length of his body.

"Good," said Nick.

"I may have good news to share with you at the Christmas party," added the Rejoicer.

"Then we look forward to the Christmas party even more than usual," said Marianne.

"And I brought a surprise for Marianne all the way from Dirt," Nick added. When Marianne lifted an eyebrow, he said, "No, no hints."

"Share?" said Tatep.

"Christmas Eve," Nick told him. "After you've shared your news, I think."

The tree-trimming party was in full swing. The newly formed Ad Hoc Christmas Chorus was singing Czech carols—a gift from Esperanza to everybody on both staffs. Clarence had gotten so mellow on the Christmas punch that he'd even offered Marianne her job back—if she was willing to be dropped a grade for insubordination. Marianne, equally mellow, said no but said it politely.

Nick had arrived at last, along with Tatep and Chornian and Chaylam and their kids. Surprisingly, Nick stepped in between verses to wave the Ad Hoc Christmas Chorus to silence. "Attention, please," he shouted over the hubbub. "Attention, *please!* Tatep has an announcement to make." When he'd finally gotten silence, Nick turned to Tatep and said, "You have the floor."

Tatep looked down, then looked up again at Nick.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I mean," Nick said, "go ahead and speak. Marianne's not the only one who'll want to know your news, believe me."

But it was Marianne Tatep chose to address.

"We've all been to see Halemtat," he said. "And Halemtat has agreed: no one will be clipped again unless five people from the same village agree that the offense warrants that severe a punishment. *We* will chose the five, not Halemtat. Furthermore, from this day forward, anyone may say anything without fear of being clipped. Speaking one's mind is no longer to be punished."

The crowd broke into applause. Beside Tatep, Nick beamed.

Tatep took a piece of parchment from his pouch. "You see, Marianne? Halemtat signed it and put his bite to it."

"How did you get him to agree?"

"We laughed at him—and we cracked our nutcrackers in the palace courtyard for three days and three nights straight, until he agreed."

Chornian rattled. "He said he'd sign anything if we'd all just go away and let him sleep." He hefted the enormous package he'd brought with him and rattled again. "Look at all the shelled nuts we've brought for your Christmas party!"

Marianne almost found it in her heart to feel sorry for Halemtat. Grinning, she accepted the package and mounded the table with shelled nuts. "Those are almost too important to eat," she said, stepping back to admire their handiwork. "Are you sure they oughtn't to go into a museum?"

"The important thing," Tatep said, "is that I can say anything I want." He popped one of the nuts into his mouth and chewed it down. "Halemtat is a talemtat," he said, and rattled for the sheer joy of it.

"Corten looks like he's been eating too much briarwood," said Chornian—catching the spirit of the thing.

Not recognizing the expression, Marianne cast an eye at Nick, who said, "We'd say, 'Been eating a lemon.' "

One of Chornian's brood sat back on his/her haunches and said, "I'll show you Halemtat's guards—"

The child organized its siblings with much pomp and ceremony (except for the littlest who couldn't stop rattling) and marched them back and forth. After the second repetition, Marianne caught the rough import of their chant: "We're Halemtat's guards/We send our regards/We wish you nothing but ill/Clip! we cut off your quill!"

After three passes, one child stepped on another's tail and the whole troop dissolved into squabbling amongst themselves and insulting each other. "You look like Corten!" said one, for full effect. The adults rattled away at them. The littlest one, delighted to find that insults could be funny, turned to Marianne and said, "Marianne! You're spineless!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marianne laughed even harder. When she'd caught her breath, she explained to the child what the phrase meant when it was translated literally into Standard. "If you want a good Dirt insult," she said, mischievously, "I give you 'birdbrain.' " All the sounds in that were easy for a Rejoicer mouth to utter—and when Marianne explained why it was an insult, the children all agreed that it was a very good insult indeed.

"Marianne is a birdbrain," said the littlest.

"No," said Tatep. "*Halemtat* is a birdbrain, not Marianne."

"Let the kid alone, Tatep," said Marianne. "The kid can say anything it wants!"

"True," said Tatep. "True!"

They shooed the children off to look for their presents under the tree, and Tatep turned to Nick. "Share, Nick—your surprise for Marianne."

Nick reached under the table. After a moment's searching, he brought out a large bulky parcel and hoisted it onto the table beside the heap of Halemtat nuts. Marianne caught a double-handful before they spilled onto the floor.

Nick laid a protective hand atop the parcel. "Wait," he said. "I'd better explain. Tatep, every family has a slightly different Christmas tradition—the way you folks do for Awakening. This is part of my family's Christmas tradition. It's *not* part of Marianne's Christmas tradition—but, just this once, I'm betting she'll go along with me." He took his hand from the parcel and held it out to Marianne. "Now you can open it," he said.

Dropping the Halemtat nuts back onto their pile, Marianne reached for the parcel and ripped it open with enough verve to satisfy anybody's Christmas unwrapping tradition. Inside was a box, and inside the box a jumble of gaudy cardboard tubes—glittering in stars and stripes and polka dots and even an entire school of metallic green fish. "Fireworks!" said Marianne. "Oh, Nick. . . ."

He put his finger to her lips. "Before you say another word—you chose today to celebrate Christmas because it was the right time of the Rejoicer year. You, furthermore, said that holidays on Dirt and the other human worlds don't converge—"

Marianne nodded.

Nick let that slow smile spread across his face. "But they *do*. This year, back on Dirt, today is the Fourth of July. The dates won't coincide again in our lifetimes but, just this once, they do. So, just this once—fireworks. You do traditionally celebrate Independence Day with fireworks, don't you?"

The pure impudence in his eyes made Marianne duck her head and look away but, in turning, she found herself looking right into Tatep's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bright expectant gaze. In fact, all of the Rejoicers were waiting to see what Nick had chosen for her and if he'd chosen right.

"Yes," she said, speaking to Tatep but turning to smile at Nick. "After all, today's Independence Day right here on Rejoicing, too. Come on, let's go shoot off fireworks!"

And so, for the next twenty minutes, the night sky of Rejoicing was alive with Roman candles, shooting stars and all the brightness of all the Christmases and all the Independence Days in Marianne's memory. In the streets, humans ooohed and aaahed and Rejoicers rattled. The pops and bangs even woke Halemtat, but all he could do was come out on his balcony and watch.

A day later Tatep reported the rumor that one of the palace guards even claimed to have heard Halemtat rattle. "I don't believe it for a minute," Nick added when he passed the tale on to Marianne.

"Me neither," she said, "but it's a good enough story that I'd *like* to believe it."

"A perfect Christmas tale, then. What would you like to bet that the story of The First Time Halemtat Rattled gets told every Christmas from now on?"

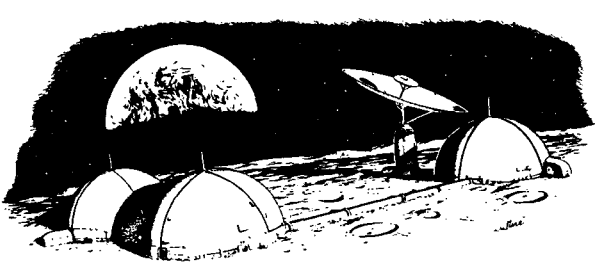
"Sucker bet," said Marianne. Then the wonder struck her. "Nick? Do traditions start that easily—that quickly?"

He laughed. "What kind of fireworks would you like to have *next* year?"

"One of each," she said. "And about five of those with the gold fish-like things that swirl down and then go *bam!* at you when you least expect it."

For a moment, she thought he'd changed the subject, then she realized he'd answered her question. Wherever she went, for the rest of her life, her Christmas tradition would include fireworks—not just any fireworks, but Fourth of July fireworks. She smiled. "Next year, maybe we should play Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* as well as *The Nutcracker Suite*."

He shook his head. "No," he said, "*The Nutcracker Suite* has plenty enough fireworks all by itself—at least *your* version of it certainly did!" ●



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Plague Year

Doomsday Book
By Connie Willis
Bantam, $22 (hardcover), $12 (paper)

Connie Willis is noted for her award-winning short stories and, to a more limited audience, her devastatingly witty after (or before) dinner speeches at SF functions. In her new (second) novel, *Doomsday Book*, the premise is time travel. In a near future, time travel seems limited to academia—scholars traveling back into time for study. The novel begins with a student, Kivrin, just making her trip back to the fourteenth century (the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, etc.). While endless precautions have been taken to prevent everything from paradox to disease being caught or spread by the traveler, I wouldn't trust the people running this show to get me safely around the block in a suburb of Podunk. For instance, the Mediaeval Department has more or less taken advantage of the Christmas holidays and the absence of the Head of the History Department to cavalierly open up the Middle Ages. Up till then it has been considered too perilous for time travelers to visit. So in essence Kivrin is pioneering a dangerous period.

After getting through a good part of the novel, the reader begins to wonder if Willis is not just writing an overlong short story. Kivrin makes it back to the Middle Ages, and becomes violently ill, despite all the precautionary inoculations. She is taken to the local gentry who look after her. At the same time, a technician on the "drop" also becomes ill, and the disease is exotic enough to have the Oxford area quarantined. And there things stay for about half the novel. Kivrin's built-in mental translator breaks down, so for a while she can't communicate with her hosts. And to balance things, in the "present," the sick techie is delirious or unconscious, so we find out nothing from him. There seems no end of phones unanswered, people unfound, information unobtained. Nothing *advances*.

Static it may be, but dull it's not—Willis's knowledge of the period is detailed, and Kivrin's reactions to the scholarly misconceptions she's come with are very amusing, as is the author's view of the ruckus at Oxford, which is full of wickedly drawn academicians.

But even these wear thin by the time one has reached the three quarter mark and nothing has changed. Kivrin is still trying to find her drop site. We realize that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we're not going to find out what's gone wrong at either end (the mystery disease at this end, and whether Kivrin has ended up in the right time/place at *that* end) until the technician comes out of his delirium, which he stubbornly refuses to do for weeks as all hell breaks loose at "modern" Oxford, whose quarantined and blithering residents began to lose their charm as phones *remain* unanswered, information *remains* unexchanged, and officials who might unravel some of what's gone awry *remain* unfound.

Finally, we (and Kivrin) discover that she has not landed in 1320, but in 1348, the year that the Black Plague hits that section of England. And hit it does, as Kivrin, immunized, watches most of the people of the village in which she is staying die. This is less exciting than depressing and we are finally left with the question of whether the present will get itself together enough to rescue Kivrin from the past. I would guess the reader's concern would be in direct proportion to the reader's fascination with details of life in the fourteenth century.

Cops, Wolves and *The Lady*

The Gypsy

By Steven Brust & Megan Lindholm
Tor, $18.95

Well, to begin with in Steven Brust and Megan Lindholm's *The Gypsy*, there is this gypsy, known as *The* Gypsy, aka the Dove, aka Cigány, Csucskari, or Chuck, or maybe Charles. Unfortunately, he has almost complete amnesia and *lots* of dreams, delusions, and hallucinations. These include frequently appearing wolves—or maybe just one wolf—and perhaps the dead woman who is guarding the gate to the cemetery, though she's probably real. Also probably real are his incarceration in a police holding tank on the suspicion of murder in a grocery store holdup, and the dead gypsy woman in a sleazy hotel room, killed with his knife, though it was in the possession of one of the arresting officers who had, for reasons he himself could not figure out, purloined it.

Then there's the Fair Lady, the short sections about whom are all in italics and who does nasty things to kittens, is served by things called noras, lidercs *and midwives (who munch on newborn babies). Her representatives in the world are of the sleazier sorts of humanity and one gathers that she is out to get The Gypsy.*

As The Gypsy says to another old Gypsy woman well into the novel, "I am living too many riddles to take pleasure in hearing yet more . . ."

Now I tend to believe that since part of the craft of SF and fantasy lies in making the unbelievable believable, the less cloudy, obfuscated, fantastical, surreal, and/or confusing the manner of telling is, the better. Otherwise the poor reader is just likely to get the hallucinations mixed up with the *real* fantasy, if you take my meaning. Therefore, my eyes tend to glaze over at this sort of melange. But in this case, I'm glad they didn't. It needs *some* effort from the reader, certainly, but s/he is aided by one particular narrative line, that of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the police officer who took the knife, who is as baffled by what's going on as we are and who, with his tyro partner and his ex-partner, becomes involved in the struggle between The Gypsy and the Fair Lady. Eventually things begin to fall into place in this evocative and originally conceived fantasy, and we even place the Owl and the Raven as the Gypsy's brothers, struggling to reach him with their own powers, helped by the Coachman (well, I said it took *some* effort).

Even if it hadn't all come together, *The Gypsy* would have been worth it for one memorably Runyonesque phrase: " 'Bullshit,' Ed said kindly . . ."

Attention To Jump

Jumper
By Steven Gould
Tor, $18.95

Steven Gould's first novel, *Jumper*, is old-fashioned. Don't get me wrong. It's very good indeed; it's just that in its concept and execution it harks back to a time in SF which could probably teach many of the new writers a thing or two about simplicity—of concept and execution. (Particularly the latter—concentrating on such currently dispensable things as exposition.) In essence, it's the one idea novel, which presents a hero(ine) with—let's call it the gimmick. That term is a little superficial but it gets the idea across. It can be intelligence to the extent of being the next evolutionary step for man (Stapledon's great classic, *Odd John*); it can be a wild talent such as reliving your life over and over (Grimwood's *Replay*); or it can be the ability to become the centerpiece of a *gestalt* personality (Sturgeon's breathtakingly original *More Than Human*). Then, instead of instant superhero, we are painstakingly shown what this means in human terms and realistically how it (the gimmick) can be (mis)-handled.

Jumper, as you just might imagine from the title, concerns a youth who suddenly discovers his ability to teleport. From whence comes *this* wild talent or why, is not gone into. We simply follow David Rice's account of what happens after he first "jumps" when he is being beaten by his abusive father. He ends up in the local library, obviously the place he feels safest. Convincing himself that it was a mental aberration, he runs away, only to "jump" again when he is about to be gang raped by a group of truck drivers. You guessed it—back to the library.

The initial part of the novel concerns his eventual arrival in New York, his acceptance of his teleporting ability and his mastery of its limitations; for instance, he can't jump anywhere he hasn't been or is unfamiliar with.

Then how does he benefit from it? Like all such "gifts" (dating back to the classic three wishes), there are built in booby traps, particularly for one who wishes to maintain a modicum of honesty as well as not knowing where to fence anything he might steal in any case. It would spoil the fun to reveal what he does, but suffice to say that he eventually is as clever as we all wish we could be under the circumstances. Once mastered, he uses his power to literally be all over the map (partially inspired by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

falling in love with a female tourist who goes to school in Oklahoma). Try to avoid it as he might, he inevitably comes to the attention of the authorities (a homeless person has taken up residence in his hall since he never uses the door of his apartment, inevitable in any unused space in NYC, and the policeman living downstairs begins to wonder . . .). One of Davy's inspirations, then, is to build a livable flat in a cave in the most inaccessible part of the mountains of Western Texas. (Plumbing is a problem, but he just jumps to the most convenient bathroom—anywhere.)

Later in the novel, an extra level of excitement is added when Davy begins to pursue a notorious terrorist for reasons too complex to go into here. This involves him in several hijacking incidents which, even with his special skill, are fairly hair-raising. All in all, a very satisfying novel that answers for you the age old question, "What if I could . . .?"

Appallingly Funny

Unwillingly To Earth
by Pauline Ashwell
Tor, $3.99 (paper)

A few issues back I remarked on a small but vociferous subgenre of SF which consisted of a first person narrative by a precocious female adolescent of the future with a talent for adventure and trouble. It might be called the Podkayne subgenre, since the best known example is that particularly annoying "heroine" of Robert Heinlein's. In the process of reviewing a recent (and more appealing) example, John Barnes' *Orbital Resonance* (the protagonist is one Melpomine Murray), I asked figuratively why these things were always written by men.

So a clever editor up and sends me the galley of an forthcoming book called *Unwillingly To Earth* which exactly fits the description (down to a protagonist named Lysistrata Lee) and is (surprise!) by a female, Pauline Ashwell to be exact. I can't call it exactly a *new* work because it is in the time-honored form of magazine SF, that is several short pieces, combined to form a "novel." The first of these was published in *Astounding* (now *Analog*) as far back as 1957, just as the Golden Age of *Astounding* was giving way to the Silver Age of *Galaxy*.

Lizzie, as she prefers to be called, is the daughter of one of the few farmers on the highly underpopulated and survival-difficult mining planet of Excenus 23, which is about as attractive as its name. (In her brief life, she's met at least seven women.)

The initial situation is the incredibly complicated manner in which Lizzie manages to get herself sent to school on Earth much against her will. This involves Lizzie getting a job at the roughest bar in town while her father recuperates in the hospital from a bad accident, and finding she has fifty of the meanest men in town suddenly becoming knights in shining armor for her sake, somehow having got the idea that's she's a stray waif. (Things like that tend to happen to her.) How that gets her to college on Earth to study cultural engineering is almost impossible to explain here, but has to do with extracting her from job and waif role without a riot occurring.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

No clichés at school, either. Her big problem (aside from not wanting to be there) is a subtle psychological resistance to the omnipresent reading machines, which is akin to a current affliction with undiscovered dyslexia. Her second adventure takes place on the moon during the equivalent of spring break and involves the mysterious explosion of a container of viruses during a highly charged political meeting (the Moon is the favored neutral ground for the four hundred and twenty four inhabited planets). She goes on to thoroughly complicate a field trip in cultural engineering, and just after graduation to confront a real such situation (preventing war between two "lost" human cultures marooned on the same planet).

I can only tell you that Lizzie's adventures are highly diverting and that the background universe is a particularly detailed and interesting one. The hectic style of her prose is a masterpiece of comic characterization ("I will not have a Person like him calling me Lizzie or in fact anything else, as of now we are Not Speaking. He raises an eyebrow and says Dear him . . ."; "I wonder what is a monitor, one of those Mechs without which the Earthbound cannot tell which way is tomorrow?"). It must be added that the novel is very, very funny at times. My favorite moment is when she is assigned an essay on "The Concept of Absolute Evil in Fiction of the Age of Impotence" (three guesses as to when the Age of Impotence was) and part of her research is in an antique magazine called *Appalling Science Fiction*. It sounds so *right*.

Peake

Titus Groan, Gormenghast, & Titus Alone

By Mervyn Peake
Overlook Press, $13.95 each (paper)

In my youth, there were two sets of books that were sacred to me. One was by J.R.R. Tolkien, a trilogy with an introductory volume. The other was another trilogy, the Titus Groan trilogy of Mervyn Peake. The fate of the two has been interesting. Both sets have become classics, one widely known, the other consistently appreciated by a much smaller number of connoisseurs. In a country claiming to be literate with a fantasy readership claiming to be at least somewhat discerning, it is shocking that the Peake has been out of print for some time. It is now again available.

There is no way to convey the strangeness and beauty of his people and places, the grotesquerie of his plots and events, the searing pictures his writing leaves in the reader's mind. Before Peake was a writer, he was a successful painter and illustrator (this edition contains his brilliant illustrations), and before he wrote fiction, he wrote poetry. The painter's eye, the poet's ear go to make up Peake's prose. It is far from artily dull, however; the trilogy is awash with bloodcurdling moments and intrigue. There is also passion, love, hate, madness, and humor.

Gormenghast is a castle, an enormous castle of endless rooms, courts, passages, roofs, stairways and attics. Vast numbers of people live there, some involved in its daily life, some totally removed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The ruling family is the focus of the first two novels, which take place in and around Gormenghast. There is Sepulchrave, the seventy-sixth Earl of Groan, subject to melancholia and madness; Gertrude, his wife, who moves always on and among a carpet of white cats; the adolescent Fuschia, their daughter, who dreams away her life in an attic full of old toys; and Titus, the son whose birth opens the first novel, whose first birthday closes it, and whose boyhood is the subject of the second.

There are the mad twin aunts, Cora and Clarisse, who finish each other's sentences, live in a room of roots, and lust for power; the servants and retainers, and always, weaving through their lives creatively and destructively, the exscullion Steerpike, who escapes from the kitchens on the day of Titus's birth and attempts to change the order of Gormenghast forever. The first two books (really one novel) come to a Wagnerian ending that leaves the third, *Titus Alone*, to go in an entirely different direction, as Titus leaves Gormenghast and enters a surrealist world with elements of both fantasy and science fiction. (This new edition also contains twelve critical essays on Peake, as well as the extant pages from an unfinished fourth novel.)

Readers know that I am spare with extremes; I will, perhaps for the second or third time ever, use the word genius, here in relation to Mervyn Peake.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Microcosmic Tales* ("100 Wondrous Science Fiction Short-Story Stories") selected by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander (DAW, $4.99, paper); *Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories 25 (1963)* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $5.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●

Customer Service or Subscriber Assistance
Please direct all changes of address
and subscription questions to:
Asimov's Science Fiction
P.O. Box 7058
Red Oak, IA 51591

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Classified Marketplace

IA DECEMBER/92

ASIMOV'S/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $6.70 per word—payable in advance—($100.50 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10168-0035.

ART AND DESIGN

FOR INFORMATION, REGARDING PRINTS, POSTERS, AND OTHER ITEMS FEATURING THE ARTWORK OF MICHAEL WHELAN, PLEASE CONTACT: GLASS ONION GRAPHICS, PO Box 88, Brookfield, CT 06804, Call or Fax (203) 798-6063.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

Bargain Books

Save up to 80% on publisher's overstocks, imports, remainders. Choose from up to 8,000 titles including 600-1,500 new arrivals each month! **Science Fiction,** Biography, History, Art, Politics, Literature, Nature, Cooking, – something for everyone. Fast shipment, moneyback guarantee. Write for **FREE CATALOG**

Hamilton Box 15-773, Falls Village, CT 06031

In The Future . . .

YOUR

Classified/Display

AD
CAN BE
PLACED HERE

For details:
SF CLASSIFIED
380 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10017
(212) 856-6307

BOOKS & PERIODICALS—Cont'd

FREE CATALOGS of Science Fiction pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46032.

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265.

MANUSCRIPTS WANTED, all types. Company with 70-year tradition. "Authors Guide to Subsidy Publishing." 1-800-695-9599.

Save up to 80% on publisher's overstocks, imports, remainders. Choose from up to 8,000 titles including 600-1,500 new arrivals each month! **Science Fiction,** Biography, History, Art, Politics, Literature, Nature, Cooking,—something for everyone. Fast shipment, moneyback guarantee. Write for **FREE CATALOG Hamilton** Box 15-773, Falls Village, CT 06031

OF INTEREST TO ALL

Transcendental Christianity. Success. Serenity. Power through knowledge. Spiritual and mundane healing. GUARDIAN Box 37335A, Raleigh, NC 27627.

PERSONAL

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance & marriage with American ladies & gentlemen! All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE INTRODUCTION AGENCY. (Dept. D/P). 2nd Floor, Mill Lane House, Mill Lane, Margate, Kent. ENGLAND TEL: 01144-843-290735.

TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME RADIO PROGRAMS. Great Science Fiction! Also, mysteries, comedies, westerns. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm. New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

No room to list the 1993 and 1994 World SF Con(vention)s this time out. They'll be back next issue. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, give your name and reason for calling right off. When writing, send an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

OCTOBER 1992

16-18—**ConCept.** For info, write: **Box 405, Stn. H, Montreal PQ H3G 2L1, Canada.** Or phone: **(514) 453-9455** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Montreal PQ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Ramada Renaissance Hotel du Parc. Guests will include: Roger Zelazny, Greg Benford.

16-18—**BaffledCon.** Carousel Hotel, Ocean City MD. The Baltimore SF Society's Halloween party.

16-18—**Ireland National SF Convention.** Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoighre, near Dublin, Ireland.

16-18—**Midwest Space Development Conference. (614) 548-7743.** Holiday Inn, Worthington OH.

22-26—**Ditto. (513) 771-7587 or 251-0806.** Harley Hotel, Cincinnati OH. Annual fanzine fans' con.

23-25—**NotJustAnotherCon. (413) 545-1924.** Campus Center Hotel, Amherst MA. Longyear, T. Doherty.

23-25—**Somewhere In Time Weekend. (818) 810-1203.** Mackinac Island, MI. For fans of that movie.

29-Nov. 1—**World Fantasy Con, Box 148, Clarkston GA 30021. (404) 921-7148.** Pine Mountain GA.

30—**Terror on Thames, % Rumain, 102 Morris Dr. #101, Laurel MD 20707. (301) 498-9030.** Near DC.

30-Nov. 1—**ConTraception, Box 1046, Lee's Summit MO 64063. (816) 524-4852.** Kansas City MO.

30-Nov. 1—**DreamCon, 10121 Evergreen Way #103, Everett WA 98204. (206) 283-8090.** David Brin.

30-Nov. 1—**Masquerade, 812 C. H. Mall, Box 235, Camp Hill PA 17011. (717) 691-0870.** Live game.

31-Nov. 1—**C. O. W. S., % Foner, 200 3rd, New Cumberland PA 17070. (717) 774-6676.** Gaming.

NOVEMBER 1992

6-8—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. (708) 383-6948.** Schaumburg IL. R. Shea, Todd Hamilton.

6-8—**NovaCon, Box 1282, Main, Dartmouth NS B2Y 4B9, Canada. (902) 462-6796.** Holiday Inn, Halifax.

6-8—**NovaCon, % Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick B66 4SH, UK. (021) 558-0997.** Birmingham UK.

6-8—**InCon, Box 1026, Spokane WA 99210. (509) 328-1613 or 747-9180.** Marvig, R. Campbell, Glass.

6-8—**ArmadaCon, % Pritchard, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead, Plymouth PL3 5HL, UK. (0752) 267873.**

6-8—**Science Fiction Days % Syruisz, ul. Dolna Panny Marii 3, Lubin, Poland.** Full con planned.

7—**UniCon, 14301 Yale Ave., Irvine CA 92714. (714) 724-6750.** *No more on this as we go to press.*

7-8—**Comic Book Baseball Card Show, % Bergson, 520 Broadway, Fargo ND 58102. (701) 235-2562.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

OVER 50% OFF DURING OUR FIRST ANTHOLOGY WAREHOUSE SALE!

Our warehouse is full -- full of classic science fiction anthologies from **Analog Science Fiction & Fact** and **Asimov's Science Fiction** magazines. We need to make room for new books -- that's why we're having our anthology warehouse sale. For only $17.95 plus $3.00 postage and handling, we will send you an assortment of 9 classic science fiction anthologies. That's less than $2.00 a book and less than half the original price.

Please send your check or money order for $22.95 (no COD's please) to:

Science Fiction Anthologies
P.O. Box 40
Vernon, NJ 07462

Please be sure to include your name and address.

While we cannot accommodate requests for specific anthologies, we guarantee that you will be delighted with your surprise assortment. Also, at this great price, these anthologies will make wonderful gifts for your science-fiction-loving friends.

Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery. Available only in U.S.

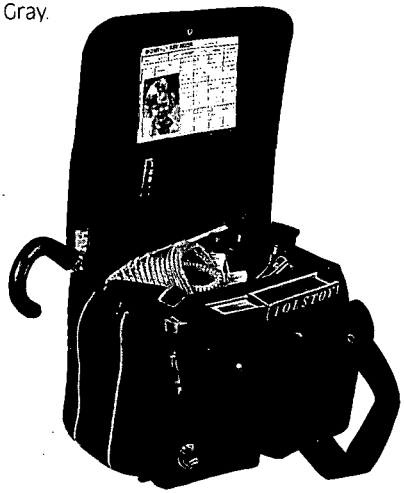
MMNA-1

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ EVERYTHING BAG

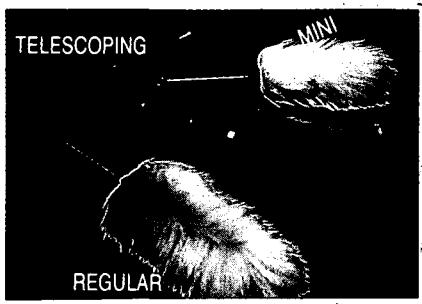
People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **$24.98** ($4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.



TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept.122 IA; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1990
1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, N.J. 08701

▼ LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters. **$22.98** ($4.00) #A1870.

▼ TALKING ALARM CLOCK

Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½"x 3"x4". **$27.98** ($4.50) #A1916.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED